

SHADE GARDENING – CONIFERS

Clark Robertson

During the Spring, Saturdays often find me helping my close friend, Tommy Adkins, at his nursery in Woodstock, GA (Twin Branch Nursery). I have been helping him for several years and do so because I enjoy assisting his customers in finding that perfect plant, or educating them on how best to eliminate unwanted garden pests; but also because I can keep up with the latest trends and newest plant introductions which are invaluable in my landscape design work.

One of the first questions I will ask someone has to do with the amount of sun or shade they have. The answer is usually a mixed bag of “a little sun in the morning,” or “dappled light throughout the day,” or the occasional “stark full sun.” But the answer I *really* enjoy hearing is, “Oh I have full shade and can’t grow a thing!”

While it’s true you will not have big, beautiful tomatoes (or any other veggie) in a shaded area, the plant choices you have may surprise you.

Gardening in the Southeast allows us the opportunity to use shade-loving plants that may not be used in colder climates or for that matter, hot, subtropical climates. We’re sort-of the shade gardening version of Goldilocks’ choices... just right.

Let’s discuss shade and sun exposures for a moment. Regardless of any USDA guidelines, such as “the number of hours of sun”, etc., *shade* is a confusing thing. There are those rare properties on creeks or at the bottom of steep north-facing hillsides that have “full shade”; but for most of us, it’s more like those other answers I hear; dappled light or a morning sun/afternoon sun environment. And if I had my choice, anything but an *afternoon* sun exposure may be adequate for most shade tolerant plants.

Conifers in the shade garden? Many are familiar with some of the tried-&-true shade tolerant plants such as the Azalea and Camellia groups, but most are not aware that there are several conifers (plants with needle-like leaves that produce seeds within cones) that also thrive in a



shaded environment. The advantages of using conifers in your garden are numerous but are highlighted by a rich textural contrast and evergreen foliage. Choices range from low, spreading groundcover-types such as Spreading False (AKA Plum) Yew, *Cephalotaxus harringtonia* ‘Prostrata’ (left), to outright trees

such as our native Hemlocks, *Tsuga canadensis* and *T. caroliniana* (*T. canadensis* varieties are more prevalent in the nursery trade).

Just within the *T. canadensis* group you'll be able to choose from the standard upright varieties such as 'Dawsoniana', weeping varieties like 'Cole's Prostrate', variegated foliage color such as 'Albospica' and 'Golden Splendor', and even super-dwarf miniatures like 'Abbott's Pygmy' which is often used as a Bonsai specimen.



'Cole's Prostrate' Hemlock



'Abbott's Pygmy' Hemlock

Another conifer that is overlooked in our shade gardens is Southern Yew, *Podocarpus macrophyllus*. Though once common in nurseries throughout the Southeast, they were not an easy 'find' in the last decade but are now becoming more attainable. Similar in appearance to some of the upright False Yews, *Podocarpus* has a much longer leaf and softer texture. They also can produce a great hedge in the shade garden if pruned correctly!



'Golden Splendor' Hemlock



Whether used as an evergreen screen, foliage accent, or specimen focal, I recommend you do a little research and ask your local nursery for these conifers in shaded gardens. You'll find them a great contrast to the typical broad-leaf plants often associated with shade and an *evergreen plant* that makes a splash when those Hostas and Ferns are dormant.