

Options for a Shady Lawn

Distribute 03-21-2019

As the years pass more and more lawns are shaded by the maturing trees in the landscape. What that means is that the lawns become less and less dense and more susceptible to weeds and diseases. If you have the trees pruned, you may be able to temporarily increase the light that reaches the grass, but the trees continue to grow larger and provide more shade. The shade is desirable because it reduces the discomfort due to the hot sun and it reduces your air conditioning bills, but it means you have lawn challenges. Even St Augustine grass, the most shade tolerant, permanent lawn grass requires at least 60% sun to prosper.

One of the options available to addressing a lawn with too much shade is to replace the grass with a shade tolerant groundcover. A groundcover can be planted as the single plant over a large area like a lawn grass, or different species can be planted as layers adjacent to shorter or taller plants. It is also effective to include flagstone or decomposed granite paths in the planting. The King William area has large mature shade trees and excellent examples of the use of shade tolerant groundcovers.

It works well for Asiatic jasmine and other groundcovers if you plant 4 inch or larger transplants right into sod killed with glyphosate. The killed sod is an effective mulch to reduce weed pressure while the groundcover fills in.

Asiatic jasmine is a versatile shade-tolerant groundcover. The small shiny leaves are attractive. Left to its own Asiatic jasmine runs like a vine and will climb trees or fences but most gardeners mow it at 6 to 12 inches tall. At that height it makes a dense, disciplined planting. It only has to be mowed 2 or 3 times a year with the lawn mower or string mower.

Plant 4-inch Asiatic jasmine transplants on 12- or 18-inch centers for a quick fill (one growing season in good soil). Two-inch transplants are also available if you want to reduce your costs, but it will take 2 growing seasons to fill in the planting area. It works well for Asiatic jasmine and other groundcovers if you plant 4 inch or larger transplants right into sod killed with glyphosate. The killed sod is an effective mulch to reduce weed pressure while the groundcover fills in.

Texas and cedar sedges are gaining popularity as a groundcover for shade. The plant resembles a lawn grass in many ways and even spreads by rhizomes. They have good drought tolerance once established and can even be mowed if you do it infrequently and very high (6 inches or higher). They are most effective however if they are maintained as clumps in a bunchgrass configuration.

Before mondo grass was identified as an elegant groundcover, we used to call it monkey grass. The grass-like plant is available in a regular (6 inches) and dwarf size (3 inches) to use as a groundcover in shade. Established beds can be thinned out to provide rooted plants for new beds. Mondo grass grows to its final height and fills in available space and then is a maintenance free evergreen grass like groundcover.

Liriope is a larger version of monkey grass. Selections vary between twelve and 18 inches tall. In addition to the attractive foliage, the plants produce blue flowers in early spring. Liriope can be thinned out like monkey grass to provide transplants for new plantings or it is available in containers up to 2 gallons at area nurseries.

Dwarf ruellia is also called dwarf Mexican petunia. It is a groundcover that will grow in sun or shade. It grows to about one foot tall with pointed leaves emerging from a central stem. Transplants are sold at area nurseries in 4 inch or 1-gallon containers. The plants will fill in in one growing season if planted on 12 to 18-inch centers. Dwarf ruellia is available with blue, pink or white flowers. They bloom more in the sun than in the shade.

Algerian and English ivy are also used as fast covering evergreen groundcovers for the shade. Planted as 1-gallon transplants they will fill-in over one growing season if planted on 18-inch centers. Many attractive plantings still exist but it appears that more and more plantings of the ivies for groundcovers have experienced dieback due to disease pressures.

If you are having trouble maintaining a lawn under shade trees consider converting to one or more of the groundcovers that prosper in the shade. They have the potential to provide an attractive groundcover with less water and work than a lawn grass.