

SHADE *Unafraid*

DESIGNER
Sam Williamson
Samuel H. Williamson Associates

IDEAL SITE
Partial shade under a
deciduous tree canopy

HIGH SEASON
Spring

MOOD
Woodsy, mysterious

IT'S A COMMON misconception that shady garden spots are best heaped with bark dust and left alone in shame. In fact, like the understory of a forest canopy, many botanical beauties grow gleefully with just a dappling of sunlight—among them delicate ferns, such as the coppery-leaved *Dryopteris erythrosora* (fig. 1), and broad-leaved, flowering perennials such as the *Hosta* (fig. 2). “Lots of yards have a big tree, some rhododendrons and mulch,” says Sam Williamson, designer of this shade-tolerant garden. “These plants can provide a carpet of interesting textures on the ground and a rich variety of seasonal changes.” Indeed, from late winter until early fall this diverse ensemble, most of its members less than knee-high in stature, amuses the eye with an unfolding pageant of new blooms, foliage and even (on the beautiful *Sarcococca confusa*, or Sweet Box shrub) glossy black berries beloved by birds and bees. So dim the lights; nature will take its course.

**DRYOPTERIS
ERYTHROSORA**

Also called an autumn fern, this evergreen beguiles with pale, coppery-green fronds that emerge in spring and mature to a glossy green.
H: 2 ft; W: 16 in



fig. 1



fig. 2

HOSTA 'JUNE'

The big, spear shaped, bright-green leaves of this mounding perennial are edged in stunning blue-green; its purple flowers bloom from mid- to late summer.
H: 10 in; W: 20 in

**BRUNNERA
MACROPHYLLA
'JACK FROST'**

Bearing coarsely textured, heart-shaped leaves with white frosted markings, this low perennial blooms with blue forget-me-not flowers in late spring. (Try planting this alongside *Brunnera M. 'Langtrees'*, the leaves of which feature a row of white spots.)
H: 20 in; W: 16-32 in



fig. 3

COMPANIONS

DISPORUM CANTONIENSE 'NIGHT HERON'

This airy perennial displays purple-green leaves and white flowers that hang like lanterns from April through July.
H: 5 ft; W: 3 ft

CIMICIFUGA 'BRUNETTE'

In late summer, white flowers grace the feathery, purple and green foliage of this tall perennial.
H: 4-5 ft; W: 2 ft

SARCOCOCCA CONFUSA

This evergreen shrub produces tiny, white fragrant flowers by early spring and black berries in the fall.
H: 3-4 ft; W: 3-5 ft

HOSTA 'HALCYON'

Larger than the *Hosta 'June'* (fig. 2) at maturity, this version features silver-blue leaves.
H: 2 ft; W: 16-20 in

HELLEBORUS ORIENTALIS

This perennial favorite displays dark green, leathery foliage and winter-blooming, buttercup-like flowers in a vast range of colors.
H: 16 in; W: 16-24 in

SARCOCOCCA HOOKE-RIANA VAR. HUMILIS

A groundcover version of *Sarcococca confusa* (at left).
H: 12-18 in; W: spreading

DICENTRA 'LANGTREES'

Also called bleeding heart, this groundcover bears lacy, blue-green foliage and white, late-spring blooms.
H: 12 in; W: spreading

EPIMEDIUM X YOUNGIANUM 'NIVEUM'

This tough groundcover produces a haze of nodding white flowers. Its purplish-copper spring foliage matures to green in summer.
H: 8-12 in; W: 10-12 in

WILLIAMSON'S TIPS

Avoid placing these plants in deep, dry shade (under a large conifer, for example). They're best suited for a north-facing yard or beneath a deciduous tree canopy exposed to rainfall and a bit of morning sun.

A good dark mulch of organic compost or well-rotted bark in the fall will help hold in the moisture and give the newly emerging plants a backdrop against which they can show off in the spring.