

Fresh Choices *for* Shade

These exotic perennials add an elegant element to shade gardens.

BY C. COLSTON BURRELL

WHEN it comes to shade plants, we are spoiled for choice. Stalwarts of the shadows like hostas, epimediums, and hellebores form the backbone of many shade gardens. A range of cherished native wildflowers from *Arunca* to *Trillium* also flourish in shady spaces. These mainstays have endured changes in fashion, and at the end of the day are sure to make everyone's list of essentials. But beyond these familiar favorites lies a bevy of underappreciated and relatively unknown treasures that can enliven your dappled garden areas.

During open garden days at Bird Hill, my Virginia garden, these disciplined exotic perennials blend seamlessly into the native palette and always turn heads, even among erudite gardeners. Why? Not just because they are unfamiliar, but also because they stand out among their neighbors for their elegance, stature, or flamboyance. (For some equally underappreciated native choices, see the chart on page 32.)

A TAPESTRY OF COLOR, FORM, AND TEXTURE

Fragrant wands of Japanese bugbane (*Actaea japonica*, syn. *Cimicifuga japonica*, USDA Hardiness Zones 4–8, AHS Heat Zones 8–1) reign supreme in my late summer garden. Ascending to three feet tall in September, the spiky single or sparsely branched wands are perfect vertical accents in any composition. White flowers open in succession up the stem from pearly-pink buds. Long before the



Fluffy clusters of fragrant white flowers on upright stems make Japanese bugbane a standout in the late summer shade garden.

flowers appear, the hefty leaves add drama that continues throughout the growing season. Glossy from the moment they emerge, they quickly expand to form an open clump of three to five leaves, each bearing three one-foot, angel-wing leaflets with decorative incised margins.

Northern maidenhair (*Adiantum pedatum*) makes a suitable foil for the foliage, and toad lilies (*Tricyrtis* spp.) bloom at the same time, supplementing the late-season spectacle. Unlike other Asian species, Japanese bugbane tolerates hot, humid climates with

aplomb and is easy to grow in rich, moist soil in light to full shade. 'Silver Blush' is a large and vigorous heat-tolerant form from plantsman Barry Yinger; its leaves emerge silver, highlighted by green veins, before aging to light green.

Most gardeners only dream of succeeding with elegant Himalayan lily (*Cardiocrinum giganteum*), whose towering peaks of fragrant trumpets adorn those West Coast gardens where both summers and winters are mild. Where summer mercury rises and nights are humid, Japanese cardiocrinum (*C. cordatum*, Zones 4–7, 7–3) holds sway. Though lacking the stature of its gigantic cousin, this offbeat summer bloomer carries a dozen or so fragrant, out-facing trumpets on two- to three-foot stems. The short-lived flowers are creamy-white to pale green

and exude their perfume in the evening. Plants grown from seed produce one to three small basal leaves during the first few seasons. After reaching mature size, the stout bloom stalks begin to elongate, ultimately bearing a ring of heart-shaped leaves halfway up that are topped with a dense flower cluster. After flowering, the original plant dies, but offsets from the bulb may produce new foliage rosettes. Plant them in drifts or let them seed randomly around the garden, rising like apparitions above lower-growing woodland foliage. Plant in rich, humusy soils in light to medium shade. Seeds need open ground free of competition in order to germinate.



I confess an odd fascination with *Chloranthus*, a handsome genus of Asian saxifrage relatives noted for its bold foliage and stark, silvery-white bottlebrush flowers. The oval to rounded, serrated leaves are held in loose whorls atop erect stems, creating a perfect mounding form. Tony Avent of Plant Delights Nursery in Raleigh, North Carolina, suggests that few plants in the woodland garden can rival the bold textural form of *Chloranthus*. “The dark green leaves, somewhat reminiscent of hydrangea, remain looking great until fall,” says Avent. In April or May, two- to three-foot stems are topped with spires of tiny, white flowers. The fuzzy spikes of *C. henryi* and *C. sessilifolius* (Zones 6–8, 8–5) are pendulous and resemble catkins, while those of *C. serratus* and *C. japonicus* (Zones 5–8/9, 8–5) are erect. All species produce a second round of blooms, extending the season.

‘Get Shorty’ is Avent’s selection of *C. sessilifolius*. The emerging foliage is stained purple-black, but fades to forest-green as the drooping white tassels open on purple stalks. This cultivar takes center stage, but

The trumpet flowers of Japanese cardiocrinum bloom on stout stems well above hostas in this shade garden, top left. Japanese chloranthus, bottom left, on the other hand, is admired primarily for the texture provided by its bold, glossy foliage.



smaller species look great with companions such as woodland peonies, ferns, and creeping phlox. Avent notes that chloranthus is “one of the easiest woodland perennials that we grow, thriving in acidic to slightly alkaline soils. As a general rule, they prefer a part shade site with well-drained, consistently moist soil, but we have found them to be quite tolerant of dry periods.”

Years ago, I brought home balm-leaved archangel (*Lamium orvala*, Zones 4–8, 8–1) from a plant sale on the West Coast. I had admired this statuesque European mint relative in English gardens, so I was delighted to see it offered for sale. The ragged round leaves are carried in pairs on 12- to 16-inch stems borne in open clumps. Showy mauve or white flowers cluster at the nodes. Flowers open as the stems elongate, so the flowers stand out early while the leaves are expanding. Flowering continues from late spring to summer as the leaves mature.



For assertive color in the spring shade garden, try balm-leaved archangel, above left, and spring vetchling, above right. Both offer brightly colored flowers, but the former has an upright habit and the latter is low and mounding.

In the catalog for Far Reaches Farm, a nursery in Port Townsend, Washington, proprietors Kelly Dodson and Sue Miliken describe the cultivar ‘Silva’ as “The King of Lamiums, which reduces the more familiar species to the status of serfs. What differentiates this selection from the species is the silver splashes on the leaves, especially in spring.” Plant in average to rich soil with even moisture; the shrubby clumps combine well with carpets of

epimedium, primrose, and sedge. Plants begin to look tired in midsummer, so cut the yellowing stems to the ground. It’s free-seeding but not troublesome; once planted, you will have enough to share.

Spring vetchling (*Lathyrus vernus*, Zones 5–7, 7–5) makes the Top 10 of spring perennials in my garden. I am so enamored of this charming woodland pea that I have collected all the commercially available cultivars. This low, mounding

charmer bursts from the ground in early spring, flowers blazing. It grows 12 to 18 inches tall. The wild form has rosy-pink, asymmetrical, pea-shaped flowers produced in airy clusters. After flowering, red pea pods develop, creating a decorative foil for the bright green, pinnately compound leaves. By autumn, the foliage takes on yellow tones if the plant has not already slipped into dormancy. Plants are easy to grow in average to rich soil in light to full deciduous shade. Tough, adaptable, and drought tolerant, this European perennial should have a place in every garden. ‘Narrow Leaf’ has willow shaped leaflets of unique beauty. Selections with flowers that are medium pink, blue with a rosy blush, and pure white exist, but may be difficult to find.

Solomon’s seals (*Polygonatum* spp.) top everyone’s list of tough woodland perennials with strong vertical form. Beyond familiar variegated Japanese Solomon’s seal (*P. odoratum* var. *pluriflorum* ‘Variegatum’) and our native *P. biflorum* lies a sphere of species and cultivars awaiting discovery. Far Reaches Farm includes dozens of selections in its on-

Sources

- Far Reaches Farm**, Port Townsend, WA. www.farreachesfarm.com.
- Frasers Thimble Farm**, British Columbia, Canada. www.thimblefarms.com.
- Lazy S’S Farm Nursery**, Barboursville, VA. www.lazyssfarm.com.
- Plant Delights Nursery**, Raleigh, NC. www.plantdelights.com.
- Prairie Moon Nursery**, Winona, MN. www.prairiemoon.com.
- Wood Thrush Natives**, Floyd, VA. www.woodthrushnatives.com.

Resources

- The Explorer’s Garden: Rare and Unusual Perennials** by Daniel J. Hinkley. Timber Press, Portland, OR, 2009.
- The Jade Garden: New and Notable Plants from Asia** by Peter Wharton. Timber Press, Portland, OR, 2005.

A cut above the standard Solomon's seal, *Polygonatum ×hybridum* 'Striatum' offers year-round interest through its strikingly variegated foliage.



line catalog. One of Dodson and Milliken's favorites is *Polygonatum ×hybridum* 'Striatum' (syn. 'Grace Barker', Zones 3–8, 8–1), which, they say, "brings the hybrid vigor of a mutt to the garden but on a short leash. White bells that play hide-and-seek among the white-variegated leaves add momentary whimsy, but it is the foliar display that brings interest from spring to fall." Arching 24- to 30-inch stems form clumps that increase steadily in any moist, rich woodland soil and they reward gardeners with season-long foliage impact in light to full shade.

A dynamic duo of woodland primroses—Japanese woodland primrose (*Primula kisanana*) and Siebold primrose (*P. sieboldii*)—offers bountiful spring color without fuss. These two Asian species thrive in warmer zones where the European selections struggle. Both thrive in rich, moist soil in light to full shade.

Japanese woodland primrose (Zones 5–8, 8–5) produces blankets of decoratively

scalloped, round leaves that are set off in early spring by open clusters of deep rose flowers on four- to eight-inch stems. Plants expand quickly by runners, so a sizeable clump is possible in a year or two. Gene Bush from Indiana, known in the blogo-

sphere as the Shade Garden Expert, allows it to scramble around and between his hellebores, enjoying the contrast between the fuzzy stems and foliage of the primrose and the heavy green of hellebores. "It is an easy doer," says Bush. "Very rewarding if given

UNDERAPPRECIATED NATIVES FOR SHADE

Name	Height/Spread (feet)	Characteristics	Nativity	USDA Hardiness, AHS Heat Zones
<i>Aralia californica</i> (elk clover, California spikenard)	5–8/5–8	Tropical appeal, twice-pinnate leaves and branched racemes of spherical flower heads; reddish-black fruit	Western North America	8–10, 10–8
<i>Arnoglossum atriplicifolium</i> syn. <i>Cacalia atriplicifolia</i> (pale Indian plantain)	4–5/2–3	Pleated leaves form dense rosettes, clusters of small white flowers bloom in summer	Eastern/Central North America	3–8, 8–3
<i>Croomia pauciflora</i> (small flowered croomia)	1½/2	Slow-creeping groundcover with wiry stems, quilted leaves, insignificant green flowers	Southeastern U.S.	7–9, 9–7
<i>Darmera peltata</i> (umbrella plant)	3–5/4–6	Pink flowers appear from stout rhizomes in spring, large rounded dark green, peltate leaves with scalloped edges follow	Western North America	5–8, 8–5
<i>Diphylleia cymosa</i> (umbrella leaf)	2–3/2–3	Bold, rounded basal leaves with sharp teeth, small white flowers, glaucous blue fruit	S. Appalachian Mountains	4–8, 7–3
<i>Enemion biternatum</i> , syn. <i>Isopyrum biternatum</i> (eastern false rue anemone)	½/1–3	Free-spreading, summer-dormant ephemeral with showy white flowers in early spring above delicate, divided leaves, winter foliage rosettes	Eastern North America	4–8, 8–4
<i>Meehania cordata</i> (creeping woodmint)	½/1½	Paired crenate leaves on trailing stems form dense groundcover, blue flowers in mid-spring clustered at stem tips	Appalachian Mountains	4–8, 8–4
<i>Synandra hispidula</i> (Guyandotte beauty)	1/1–2	Self-sowing biennial with heart-shaped leaves, numerous spikes of white snapdragonlike flowers with purple streaks	Eastern/Central North America	5–8, 8–5



Easy-to-grow but out-of-the-ordinary plants such as Japanese woodland primrose, left, and upright wild ginger, above, are wonderful for filling in the spaces in a shady garden. Both are clump-forming and will spread slowly over time.

loose organic soil with a hardwood mulch to travel between. It is not at all invasive, just a great open colony of color.”

Siebold primrose (Zones 4–8, 8–1) tolerates tough conditions by going dormant in summer. The scalloped oval foliage emerges early, followed by showy flowers with petal margins as intricate as snowflakes. Colors vary from white to pink, rose, blue, and purple. Soon after flowering, plants slip into dormancy.

Upright wild ginger (*Saruma henryi*, Zones 4–8, 8–3), is a trouble-free Chinese woodlander that deserves a place in every shade garden. “I love the fuzzy green-silver

leaves,” says Jenny Rose Cary, author of *Glorious Shade* (Timber Press, 2016). The heart-shaped leaves, which alternate up the two-foot stems, resemble those of their cousin wild ginger (*Asarum canadense*). Flat, three-petaled, buttery-yellow flowers grow on short stalks in the leaf axils as the stems elongate. This succession of new flowers extends the bloom season. Cary suggests “mixing *Saruma* in with spring ephemerals that retreat below ground, as the leaves look good throughout the growing season. Plants do well for me in the dappled shade beneath oaks and *Robinia*, and gently seed into woody soil.”

False lily of the valley (*Speirantha gardenii*, syn. *S. convallarioides*, Zones 5–8, 8–5), a modest but worthy evergreen groundcover from China, sports leathery, elongated oval leaves from slow-creeping rhizomes. The stemless foliar rosettes are low and spreading, unlike true lily of the valley (*Convallaria majalis*), whose leaves stand erect. Tony Avent aptly describes the mid-spring blooms as “short spikes of white, alien, satellitelike flowers just topping the foliage.” Avent’s 10-year-old clump is only three feet in diameter; in my garden, the rate of increase is similar.

It drapes over a low stone wall, keeping company with epimedium, creeping phlox, and fine silver-gray *Carex* ‘Silver Scepter’. It is easy to grow, but slow to increase in average to rich, moist soil in light to full shade.

No matter how full your garden beds, there is always room for one or more outstanding new plants. Whether you fancy flowers or foliage, these singular perennials absolutely warrant your consideration. 🌿

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