

Gardening in Damp Shade

Mandy Featherstone of Mandsand Plants entreats us to go with our boggy, shady spots

Boggy, squelchy, claggy and shady spot? Or is that just an extra dimension in your garden? Adopt the latter mentality and create yourself a 'cool soft terrain' instead. We most of us admire the mosses lichens and ferns tucked into crevices on our woodland walks, not to mention the soft terrain underfoot, so why not embrace such conditions in your own spot? We introduce 'beach -type' plantings to our plots so I would say a 'wet-spot' fits very well into a garden like mine in Cheshire!

Yes, land drains can and should be considered, but there are other ways to deal with wet shade for those of us who can't go down that route and maybe just want to get on with growing/planting within the confines we face.

So, without further ado, here are a few thoughts on getting your plants off to a flying start in these conditions.

Plant in the spring and throughout the warmer growing season, as opposed to leaving new plants lying dormant in the cold and wet. Grow on your plants into a reasonable size with an established root system, rather than let a very young plant have to work too hard. This also works well for bulbs, and lets you plant at a time when you can see a position for them following the winter clear-up.

Proud or mound planting works well in these conditions, so that roots are not initially so bogged down that they fail to travel successfully into their new location.

As the soil is likely to be impoverished, try at least to give your planting hole a good start by digging it large enough so that you have room to backfill with good friable earth into which those roots can grow. Along with organic matter, I find adding plenty of composted bark works a treat in breaking up those clods and looks very natural should you choose to top-dress.

The good news is that, when it comes to plants for this location, there is an abundance of material - something for everyone, be it big and bold, all-season interest, natural and native, or herbaceous havoc.

Dogwoods (NOT, I believe, a plant just for roundabouts!) give fiery stem colour for months, and their Spring pruning provides you with stakes and maybe further plants too. Instead, try a contorted *Salix tortuosa* underplanted with snowdrops, carpets of *Primula vulgaris*, *Ranunculus 'Brazen Hussey'*, pulmonarias, lily of the valley and snakeshead fritillaries. This would delight you for weeks. Intersperse with ferns, the pink cow parsley, and foxgloves. Strategically, add the odd log or stone and you could stop there.

Alternatively, for further colour, move onto the statuesque candelabra primulas, sibirica iris, ferny-leafed dicentras, trollius, astilbes, hostas, geum rivale, ligularias and woodland cranesbills, which will provide all manner of colour, shape and form. For later season, you can do no better than a dark-leafed, *Cimicifuga racemosa* (Actaea) which emits a heady scent in August, followed by super seed-heads, having already given months of interest from its foliage alone. A clump of *Persicaria amplex-*



"Dogwoods, not, I believe, a plant just for roundabouts!"

Photo: Plant Hunters' Fairs



"Underplant with *Ranunculus Brazen Hussey*"

Photo: Plant Hunters' Fairs

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icaulis and lythrum, combined with a grass such as a miscanthus or a calamagrostis, will reward you for weeks.

If you have plenty of space, darmera combined with the variegated Iris pseudocorus and a blue leafed hosta such as 'Krossa Regal' is dramatic, as is the royal fern Osmunda regalis which is a statement all on its own.

Ferns, hostas, grasses and bamboos work in harmony with plenty of shapes and sizes to choose from. The carex grasses give colours of yellow, bronze and greens, and Acorus 'Ogon' certainly brightens a spot in Winter. Beware when choosing bamboo as some can RUN. It took me two years to dig out the result of just one offshoot someone once gave me! Go for clump-formers and consider planting in a large container. Watch out for lysimachias too: they grow a treat but be ardent in splitting them as they too run.

Once you have got to know your spot, the orchids, arisaemas and podophyllums like these conditions.

Maybe 'less is more' for you. (I love it but have never achieved such in my own plot - someone please tell me how when you want to 'grow and experiment'!). Consider the bark of the birches, multi-stemmed especially, underplanted with a 'lawn' of ivy. Add a stumpery, a rustic bench - hey presto just sit back and enjoy!

There are many shrubs which will suit this site especially if you plant initially. For a low-maintenance and all season scheme I found pyramid or column yews repeat-planted and carpeted with one of the silvery euonymus worked a treat, providing winter colour and form and a cool restful haven in summer. Holly or bamboo would have a similar impact, should you prefer glossy leaves or movement from them.

Finally, invest in some good-soled, warm wellies to encourage you to traverse your new terrain throughout the season - whatever the weather!!

(And don't forget a spot for a pot of colourful heucheras, heucherellas and tiarellas!)

Mandy is a very experienced nurserywoman and keen plantswoman. She runs Mandsand Plants and gardens in the north of Cheshire.



"... a clump of Persicaria amplexicaulis and lythrum"

Photo: Plant Hunters' Fairs



"Don't forget heucheras, heucherellas and tiarellas"

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