



**CORNELL
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EXTENSION OF
ONEIDA COUNTY**

HOME GROWN FACTS

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Growing a Woodland Wildflower Garden Nancy Murawski, Master Gardener Volunteer

Love to garden, but live on a heavily wooded lot with an abundance of shade? Don't think of it as a problem to overcome, but as an opportunity to grow an entirely different type of garden. True, armfuls of sun-loving flowers won't flourish in your yard, but a beautiful, peaceful retreat to enjoy from spring through fall can be created.

In creating a woodland garden, you'll want to enhance the natural beauty of the setting, not subdue it. As with all gardening the key is choosing the right plant for the right location. So, before you buy plants, assess your area. First, determine if your native soil is acid or alkaline. Soil pH test kits are available at garden centers and at your local Cooperative Extension office. CCE of Oneida County does soil pH testing. A sandwich bag size sample fee is \$2. The results of the test will help determine what plants are likely to thrive in your garden. You can amend the acidity level somewhat, but you will have better luck going with what you have naturally. Next, check for pockets with more or less sunlight. Plant choice for brighter areas will be greater than for total shade. Check to see if there are areas that are always wet or always dry. If you will need supplemental water, will you be able to provide it? How much competition are your plants likely to have from tree roots? Will you want to put in pathways or a seating area? Can you see in your mind's eye where they should go? There is a plant for nearly every growing situation, the trick is to match the plant to the site.

Because most plants need light to bloom well, a woodland garden must rely more on foliage than flowers. However, there is a period in the spring before deciduous trees leaf out when you can have a variety of colorful blooming flowers in your garden. Spring ephemerals produce foliage and bloom while spring sunlight is available on the woodland floor, then go dormant in the summer. *Sanguinaria* (bloodroot) is one such plant. It is a low grower (6-8 inches) with star-shaped white flowers that last briefly, but as they fade, attractive leaves expand and can last into summer if kept moist. Bloodroot, which gets its name from the red root sap, increases by spreading rhizomes and self-seeding. This plant survives despite competition from tree roots.

Mertensia virginica (Virginia bluebells) is another springtime beauty. Growing 18-24 inches tall, it sports attractive blue-green foliage. In spring to early summer pink buds open into bell-shaped blue flowers. Bluebells tolerate moist to wet soil. They increase yearly, forming a large colony.

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In early spring, woodland walkers often spy *Trillium grandiflorum* (White trillium). It grows wild in this area, but you should buy cultivated plants. Trillium is identified by its three green leaves, three green sepals and three white flower petals. The flowers are short-lived, but in a damp location the leaves may last into summer.

Blooming later in the spring/early summer is red *Aquilegia Canadensis* (wild columbine). These plants grow 1-3 feet tall and have nodding red/yellow flowers that attract hummingbirds. They flourish with some sun and form colonies by self-seeding.

Polygonatum biflorum (Solomon's seal) is another plant blooming at this time. Growing 18-24 inches tall in full to part shade, these plants have graceful arching stems with white bell-shaped flowers. They add a nice vertical element to complement shorter woodland plants.

Native ferns are a perfect choice for woodland gardens, providing a variety of different sizes, textures and shades of green. Most prefer slightly acidic moist soil, but some, like Lady Fern, are adaptable to drier sites.

For a good woodland ground cover, consider *Asarum canadense* (wild ginger). It grows 6-12 inches tall in part to full shade. Grown mostly for its beautiful heart-shaped leaves, it has only small insignificant flowers hidden under its leaves.

Bringing the season to a close are several late summer/early fall bloomers. *Eurybia divaricata* (wood aster) displays many small white flowers even in considerable shade. This plant tolerates dry soil. *Chelone* (turtlehead) is a native perennial named for the shape of its flowers, which resemble snapping turtle heads. It does well in heavy wet soils and spreads to form large colonies. Pink or white varieties bloom as other flowering plants are winding down. *Lobelia cardinalis* (cardinal flower), a showy choice for late season, grows 1-6 feet tall in moist to wet soil, adding a pop of bright red flowers. Hummingbirds sip its nectar.

Plants can be purchased from local garden centers or mail order. Some can be grown from seed; however, seedlings often take a long time before becoming mature enough to bloom. In general, plants grown in the shade take longer to establish than those grown in full sun, so don't expect instant gratification, but a wooded wonderland is worth waiting for.

For more information on these and many other woodland plants, try the following websites:

www.gardening.cornell.edu

www.wildflower.org (Lady Bird Johnson Wildflower Center)

www.plants.usda.gov (contains a plant database)

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