

A Rather Shady Affair

One of the most challenging tasks for any homeowner is finding those perfect plants for the shade garden or north side of the house. Whenever teaching home landscape design classes I am always bombarded with requests to suggest a few plants that are not only attractive but will flourish in shady areas and woodland sites.

Here come those fabulous Brunnera to the rescue. They tend to form 12 inch to 18 inch high mounds that are 18 inches 24 inches wide with baby blue to lavender forget-me-not type flowers occurring in late spring to early summer and lasting up to four weeks. They typically have heart shaped leaves, some with yellow margins, some with silver spots and still others with silverfish overlays. They all have one thing in common, they are attractive not only when blooming but all season long. They are capable of making a statement as an accent plant or as a solid groundcover, and best of all they handle a lot of shade. I have grown them under our Jack Pines and along the north side of our foundation with equal success. Best of all the leaves hold well into the late fall. We have a Jack Frost Brunnera against our foundation that still exhibited gorgeous foliage two weeks after the leaves from the adjacent hostas had frozen back for the year.

Brunnera tend to be very forgiving and are generally rated for zones 3 - 8. They will not tolerate too much sun or heat, however, so protect them. These plants prefer soils that have good drainage. One of the things that I always recommend with most plantings is what I refer to as "a \$100 hole for a \$10 plant". By this I mean that the best time to influence the health and long term vigor of a plant is at the time of planting. A good rule of thumb is to dig your planting hole at least twice as wide as the plant rootball itself, and preferably three times as wide. I always then backfill around the plant with a mix of 1/3 native soil, 1/3 good quality screened topsoil, and 1/3 organic matter such as sphagnum peat moss. I employ this same procedure with the Brunnera I plant.

Following are four of my favorite Brunnera varieties:

1. Brunnera macrophylla 'Hadspen Cream' has heart shaped leaves with green centers flanked by irregular yellow margins. It is absolutely beautiful and brightens the foggiest, shadiest day.
2. Brunnera macrophylla 'Jack Frost' is one that I have specified for several years as a groundcover par excellence. It has strong green leaf veins and a wonderful silverfish overlay. Get ready for the compliments from your guests.
3. Brunnera macrophylla 'Langtrees' has numerous irregular white to silver spots between the veins on the outer half of the leaves.
4. Brunnera macrophylla 'Looking Glass' has heart shaped leaves that cup downward and are a rather solid silver in color. I have ordered 25 for my own gardens for this coming spring.

All of the Brunnera mix well with other shade tolerant plants. I always like to see them planted in clusters of 3, 5, 7 and so forth. Many times I will specify the Jack Frost massed in front of Krossa Regal or Blue Angel Hostas. The size and color contrast makes for a striking bed. Dress the bed up with some Lamium maculatum 'Purple Dragon' or 'Pink Pewter' creeping in front for an added treat.

Brunnera are also terrific for setting off a bed of Taunton Yew used as a backdrop. I also like to mix in an occasional Fanal or Etna Astilbe for a splash of red for contrast and to accentuate the unusual foliage of the Brunnera.

Finally, the most breathtaking shade bed I have ever seen was the simplest. It was a mass planting of Jack Frost Brunnera acting as the groundcover beneath three wonderful five stem clump Whitespire birches. There were a few very large character boulders imbedded for additional accent.

Whatever you choose for your shade bed, just don't overlook those incredible Brunnera. Those challenges and frustrations created by the shade will simply melt away as your success rate soars. Happy landscaping!

Donna Evans is co-owner of Gizmo Creations LLC, a landscape design and website design company located just north of Brainerd, Minnesota. Gizmo Creations designs landscapes for homeowners, commercial buildings and landscape contractors throughout the country. Gizmo Creations has numerous sample plans and photos of landscapes on their website at <http://www.gizmocreations.com>.