

Gardens

Easy border plans

No design skills needed! Plant the perfect border with **James Alexander-Sinclair's** ready-made plan. This month he tackles a tricky shady site

There may have been times when you have wandered into the supermarket and promptly forgotten what you'd come to buy. (Come on, admit it.) That's why we have lists – otherwise there's the danger that you wander about buying any old stuff and realise when you get home you don't have the one thing you went out for.

It's the same when shopping for plants. If you go to the garden centre and just buy whatever happens to look good on the day, you'll get home with bags bulging but nowhere suitable to plant your new treasures. It's always best to think first and try and draw up a plan, with a list of plants, before you go. It doesn't need to be particularly beautiful, just practical.

A simple scale drawing, for example, where 1cm on the page equals 1m on the ground, with plants roughly sketched in, will do. Look through books and gardening magazines for plants that will thrive in your border, and remember to check their heights and spreads to ensure you get the spacing right.

A plan will save you from buying unnecessary plants and help you look carefully at the conditions you have. It's also easy to do, even if you have the drawing skills of a greenfly. At the same time, remember spontaneity is fun and if you're suddenly captivated by, say, a salvia the colour of Paul Newman's eyes, then it's okay to give into temptation – provided you don't do it too often!

Coming Up

This month James creates a lush, textured planting plan for a problem shady area.

April Jane Moore plants an instant annual border for colour, height and impact.

May James designs the perfect low-maintenance border – and it's not all shrubs!

June In the final part, James makes a bright and beautiful border for late-summer colour.

Heleniums and agastache provide colour in James's late-summer border (revealed in June)

PART 1

Planting in shade

In any planting situation, you need to realise the limitations. Assuming the ideal is a warm, sunny border, few of us actually have gardens that are not disadvantaged in some way.

The most common problem we suffer is shade. Almost everybody has a shady corner of which they despair. True, it's rubbish for sunbathing and many plants will not enjoy living there, but there are positives – lots of plants that hate hot sunshine will flourish in a bit of cover. No situation is too dreadful and no conditions too extreme – there are plants that will

grow anywhere, from the tops of windswept hillsides to the deepest and scabbiest bogs. It's just a matter of searching them out.

There are certain things you must sacrifice in order to plant successfully in shade. The main thing is colour. Almost every brightly hued plant needs sun. But don't lose hope – there are many things that will be happy under trees or in the lee of houses. Think subtle greens with interesting textures and shapes. These combined with the odd shining white flower should do the trick.



1 Dig in lots of compost, manure or leafmould. It's vital to add organic matter to your border before planting to give new plants the best start. If shade is caused by trees, the soil will be poor because they suck nutrients and water from the ground.



2 Divide geraniums to make more plants – a decent specimen can often be chopped in half. When buying plants, look for the biggest and healthiest. Not only will they do better than the weaklings, but you can divide some plants straight away. And that has to be good – two plants for the price of one!











3 Position plants according to your plan but don't worry if it needs a bit of tweaking, it's there as a guide. If you only see the border from one side, group more plants in your sightline. Don't plant too near large trees because of their shallow roots.

Border plan

To give your design a naturalistic look, place plants in groups of three, five or, in fact, any odd number. One or two plants alone can look dotty.

Key to plants

-  *Sarcococca confusa*
-  *Geranium macrorrhizum*
-  *Epimedium x youngianum 'Niveum'*
-  *Anemone x hybrida 'Honorine Jobert'*
-  *Dryopteris erythrosora*
-  *Helleborus orientalis*
-  *Geranium phaeum*
-  *Luzula nivea*



When planting any new border, dig it over and add compost or other organic matter

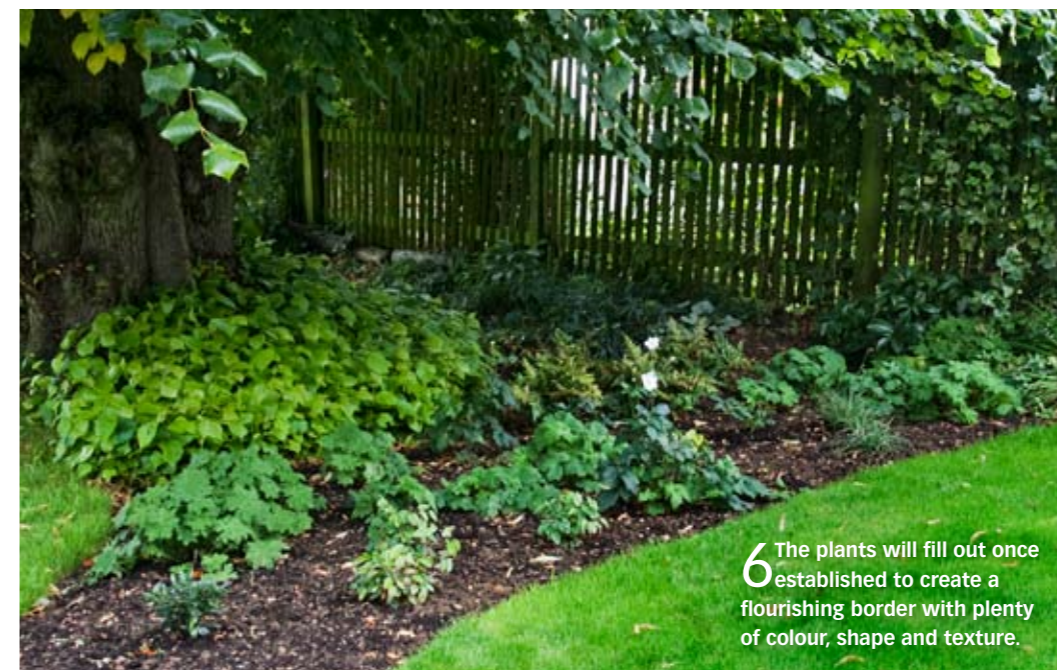
Plan scale 1:50



4 Get planting! Add a handful of bone meal, general-purpose or granular slow-release fertiliser to each planting hole. For pot-bound plants, tease apart any tightly entwined roots with your fingers. When all the plants are in the ground, lay a mulch of organic matter to suppress weeds and retain moisture.



5 Water in new plantings – you should always do this, even if it's raining. In a bed like this it would be sensible to keep watering for the first season. The plants will tell you if they are thirsty because they'll go all droopy and wan, so listen to them.



PHOTOS: PAUL DEBOIS; ILLUSTRATION: JAMES ALEXANDER-SINCLAIR

6 The plants will fill out once established to create a flourishing border with plenty of colour, shape and texture.

factfile

Total cost of plants
£117.90

Time to prepare ground
Two hours

Time to plant
Two hours

Time to full maturity
Two years

Location
Problem shady areas, any soil types



Anemone x hybrida
'Honorine Jobert'



Helleborus
orientalis



Sarcococca
confusa



Dryopteris
erythrosora



Geranium
phaeum

Plants for our shade border

I chose these plants to give as much interest as possible for most of the year, including a good mixture of texture, foliage and flower. They all came in 2-litre pots. This is the standard nursery size and big enough to house a decent-size plant, without being too expensive. They were all sourced from a local nursery and cost £4.80 each (with the exception of the sarcococca, which cost £7.50).

They're not big enough to give instant coverage, but in a couple of years... If you can't wait that long, it's easy to fill the gaps with annuals. White busy Lizzies will lighten the gloom as will pansies, *Nicotiana sylvestris* and forget-me-nots. Bulbs such as crocus and the species *Tulipa turkestanica* are also good fillers.



Sarcococca
confusa x 1

An evergreen shrub with tiny flowers that smell like George Clooney's aftershave (although I can't verify this fact!). Height 1.8m x spread 1m.



Geranium
macrorrhizum x 3

An excellent low-growing plant with pinky flowers and autumn colour. Its only drawback is a faint smell of cat pee. Height 50cm x spread 60cm.



Epimedium x
youngianum 'Niveum' x 3

A low-growing evergreen with persil-white flowers and slightly

coy blushing to the leaves in spring and autumn. Height x spread 30cm.



Anemone x hybrida
'Honorine Jobert' x 3

Pure-white flowers with eggy centres in late summer. The leaves are semi-evergreen. Spreads slowly and inexorably to take over Wiltshire. Height 90cm x spread 60cm.



Dryopteris
erythrosora x 5

A semi-evergreen fern, with a slight coppery tinge to the fronds, it is an excellent variety for the border. Height 50cm x spread 35cm.



Helleborus
orientalis x 3

The Lenten rose has white, plum or a sort of greenish flower in late winter and early spring. Height x spread 45cm.



Geranium
phaeum x 3

Also known as the mourning widow. Deep blackcurranty coloured flowers in May. Height 75cm x spread 50cm.



Luzula
nivea x 3

Woodrush, a slowly spreading grassy evergreen with small white flowers in summer. Height x spread 45cm.

Adapting the plan

Obviously it doesn't matter if you don't have a border this shape because these plants will be fine in any shady part of your garden. If you have a larger area, use more plants, say five where we have suggested three. If your border is smaller, then pick your favourites from the list and go with them. If you have a very small border, it's best to stick with the evergreen varieties in this plan rather than dotting around one of each variety.

Also, try and stick to the order of the plants. The lower-growing ones are much better at the front and the geranium and dryopteris will fare best in your darkest, poorest spot.

Coping with trees

■ Trees drain the surrounding area of nutrients, so dig in a generous amount of organic matter before planting, and every autumn, too.

■ The area next to the trees will be dry because of their hungry roots and

overhanging branches, so make sure that you water any new plants well and keep a careful eye on them in hot, dry weather.

■ Trees often have roots close to the surface, which can make planting difficult. Try and work your plan

around them as much as you can.

■ Beware of lime trees, which are susceptible to aphids that will drip gunk on your plants.

■ In autumn, make sure fallen leaves don't smother your young plants.