

SHADY PLACES

IN BY-THE-WAY-

SPACES

by Maxine Paetro



Photo by Jennifer May

Asiatic, Oriental, and species lilies are in bud, ready to trumpet in the rousing third act in a shady, three-act garden play.

One day in high June, a visitor to my garden said, “There will come a time when you will like foliage more than you like flowers.”

I was in rose heaven at the time and couldn’t imagine that greenery would ever overshadow every shade of rose and peony. Fifteen years later, I’m still in love with my summer border and its few weeks of glorious bloom. But, I’ve come to adore my shade gardens just as much, because of their soothing succession of cool, multi-hued greens before, during and after the hot color explosion on the ides of June.

I have several sheltered gardens that fill the dappled spaces at the margins of my sunny central gardens. But, the shade garden I’ll describe here is a proven enchanter three seasons a year.

Picture a north-facing garden shaped like the capital letter “D,” thirty feet long by fifteen feet deep at its widest point. The straight edge runs along one side of the house and the belly of the “D” is semi-circled by a gravel driveway. In the center of this garden stands a fifty-foot tall spruce.

My “driveway garden” is a small dry patch, mostly in shadow, and in winter it gets the brunt of nor’easters and up to four feet of snow. But, it also gets more daylight than I expected; a few morning hours and a good long splash of afternoon sun.

In the earliest months, when the ground is still cold, the hellebores open the garden’s first act, poking up their deeply-divided leaves and pastel, flower-like sepals in green-and-white blushed with rose.

As snow melts, fiddleheads unfurl and swaths of cobalt blue-and-white muscari sweep across the garden underfoot. The pulmonaria – mounding, front-of-the-border show-offs – display boldly-spotted, strappy leaves and an abundance of blossoms: Sissinghurst White, Raspberry Splash, Opal in pinky-lavender and Azurea, an astonishing vivid blue.

Hostas are the mainstay of the driveway garden from spring through late fall. In May, before the pulmonarias finish blooming, tight spikes of hostas push through the mulch, and then the leaves open in a wide range of color from misty blue-green to light-catching chartreuse.

With hostas, leaves are the thing: Deep hunter green edged in white, mid-greens splashed with yellow, swirled, paint-brushed patterns of gray and green, and ruffled lime rosettes that bring light to dark corners. Hostas have heart-shaped leaves and wavy-edged ones. Some are ridged or quilted or cupped or spooned, and there are gigantic three-footers and ankle-high pixies. With more than 1,500 varieties of hostas, it’s hard to pick favorites, but mine are Blue Cadet, Great Expectations, Sum and Substance, June,

Guacamole and Praying Hands.

As the bulbs fade, the diminutive bleeding heart, *dicentra exima*, arrives, along with *tiarellas* and *heucheras* with their scalloped leaves filling the gaps between gangs of hostas.

And when June comes on and summer begins, I fall in love with the next tier of perennial bloom.

Phaeum, a favorite cranesbill geranium, sends up airy wands of plum-colored, slightly reflexed, five-petaled flowers above leaves that echo the blossoms with a five-point burgundy mark. The dwarf aruncus, with its fine ferny foliage and short white plumes, grows in the foreground under stands of *digitalis grandiflora*, a truly perennial foxglove that holds stalks of cream-yellow flowers well into July.

It is mid-summer now and the driveway garden is in fine form. Today, *Corydalis lutea*, a long-blooming plant with lacy foliage and stems tipped with clusters of goldfish-like yellow flowers, peeks between the edging stones and brightens the shadows.

The hostas are in their glory. Above the stately leaves are new spikes of pale lavender bells. The ferns alongside the house form a backdrop for the brass section: Asiatic, Oriental, and species lilies are in bud, ready to trumpet in the rousing third act in a shady, three-act garden play.



The perennials mentioned above can be bought at most well-stocked nurseries and online. I buy mine locally, stocking up on sale plants right now. My spring bulbs and lilies come from Van Engelen (www.vanengelen.com) and its sister nursery, John Scheepers (www.johnscheepers.com). For a yummy assortment of hostas as well as excellent peonies and daylilies, check out Song Sparrow Nurseries at www.songsparrow.com.



Maxine Paetro. Photo by Jennifer May

Maxine Paetro co-writes with author, James Patterson. Their two recent collaborations, “8th Confession” and “Swimsuit” are both NY Times #1 best-sellers. See more of her *Amenia garden*, *Broccoli Hall*, at www.BroccoliHall.com.

Photographer Jennifer May’s work has appeared in the *New York Times*, *Gourmet*, *People*, and many other publications. She is currently working on two book projects to be published in 2010: “*River of Words: Portraits of Hudson Valley Writers*”; and a book of portraits of women for *Stewart, Tabori & Chang*. See more of her work at jennifermay.com.