

*My landscape receives only filtered light through our mature trees and I have a hard time finding a good variety of plants for color. I have Azaleas, Camellias, and Hydrangeas as foundation plants and use a lot of Caladiums, Begonias, and Impatiens. Can you suggest some other options?*

My email response being more extensive, I'll narrow the list down to my top 10 for the rest of our readers. Some are perennials, some are annuals. Not all are on this list for their flowers but all are worthy additions to your semi-shaded landscape.

*Abutilon* 'Golden Kaleidoscope' – This fast grower will easily become 5-6 feet tall and wide but can be pruned to shape as needed. It has a naturally rounded growth habit that gives it a healthy, dense form. The intense gold and green variegation on the large maple-like leaves is sure to catch the eye. The 1 inch flowers are a soft orange and are present nearly year-round, attracting hummingbirds along the way. This easy to grow perennial does well in full sun or partial shade but you will get more flower-power with increased sun exposure.

*Acanthus* – *Acanthus* is way up there on my list of favorite shade plants. (WARNING: some nursery tags say *Acanthus* likes full sun – Not in Texas!) The glossy, heavily-lobed leaves add an instant tropical look to any shaded area. The mature size of this evergreen perennial depends greatly on the quality of your soil but the foliage typically reaches heights of 3-4 feet and the long-lasting bloom spike easily reaches 6 feet or more. The clump gets bigger with time as the mother plant produces offsets so plant in an area with room for naturalization.

*Alocasia* 'Borneo's Giant' – Stunning. Huge. That pretty much sums up this giant *Alocasia*, often referred to as Elephant Ears. If your landscape can support the mature size of this plant, it will undoubtedly be noticed by visitors. Easily reaching 6 feet or more in its first year, a mature specimen exceeds heights of 10-12 feet with individual leaves as big as 6 feet. The heart-shaped leaves are held firmly upright by the hefty stems making the size more manageable in the landscape. A hard winter could potentially kill 'Borneo's Giant' so protect it during the first winter of establishment by cutting back the foliage after our first freeze and mulching for the winter.

Australian Tree Fern (*Cyathea cooperi*) – I fell in love with this plant when I saw the enormous specimens native to Hawaii. I had one for several years in a container, wishing I had the courage to attempt growing it in the ground. After overcoming my fear of losing it to winter frost, it has been in the ground for two years now and doing well. I pile mulch around the trunk and keep it well watered through the winter. The fronds get damaged by freezes but they grow back quickly. Tree ferns benefit greatly from fertilizer for acid-loving plants and the fronds are unforgiving if not watered often enough. As a trunk develops, water both the ground and the trunk.

*Begonia* 'Dragon Wing' – When you said you currently use *Begonias* in your landscape, I'm assuming you're referring to the common Wax *Begonias*. While Dragon Wing *Begonias* are most frequently sold as a hanging basket plant, you are missing a stellar performer if you do not use it in your landscape. I have seen Dragon Wings survive our

mild winters but I suggest using them as part of an annual bed where they can be replaced by fall color at the appropriate time.

*Brunfelsia* – More commonly known as Yesterday, Today, and Tomorrow because the fragrant flowers change colors going from violet to lavender to white in a three day period. Compact varieties grow to 3-5 feet and non-compact varieties usually range from 6-8 feet. Plant in rich soil and feed with slow release fertilizer, supplementing at least once each year with a water-soluble fertilizer for acid-loving plants. While mostly considered to be evergreen, it can be damaged by frost if not planted in a protected area. This plant is poisonous if ingested so may not be a good choice if you have pets that eat plants.

*Coleus* ‘Kong’ – The leaves on Kong Coleus will get 9 inches wide and the plant itself reaches a height of about 2 feet. The bold colors and size of the foliage make it stand out in any shaded area. Of the 4 colors in the series, I prefer Rose because of the vibrant contrast of colors. If stems or leaves get damaged by wind or insects, simply cut off the damage and enjoy the ensuing flush of new growth. Because Coleus is grown for its foliage and texture, flowers should always be removed as soon as you see them for two reasons: 1) Because they are not particularly attractive, and 2) Because when the plant is putting all its energy into flower and seed production, the foliage suffers in both size and color. The same rule applies to your Caladiums.

*Ligularia* ‘Gigantea’ – While I like other *Ligularia* cultivars, ‘Gigantea’ is my favorite. It is not spotted like some others, but the leaves get well over a foot wide and are so dark green and glossy that they hardly seem real. Each clump gets 2-3 feet tall and 3-4 feet wide and is evergreen in our area. While it does produce a yellow daisy-like flower in the fall, I personally find the flowers unattractive. This one is grown for its foliage and I can virtually guarantee it will be one of your favorites too. While it is tolerant of some direct sun, it needs to be shaded in the afternoon.

*Oxalis* ‘Charmed’ – This one is not like the weed oxalis you do everything to keep out of your landscape, although they are certainly related. The Charmed series is the best ornamental *Oxalis* I’ve seen. There are three colors in the series: Wine has purple foliage; Velvet has darker, nearly black foliage; and Jade has green leaves with a silver sheen to them. All have shamrock-shaped leaves and pink flowers in slightly different hues. This *Oxalis* is a clumping perennial, reaching heights of 12-15 inches, and looks best planted in mass groupings.

*Torenia* ‘Summer Wave’ – This trailing variety of *Torenia* beats other varieties in both flower size and vigor. There are four colors available in the series, all shades of pink, blue, purple, or white. Summer Wave *Torenia* would make an excellent flowering groundcover for your filtered-light landscape because they are tough enough to handle our summer conditions and bloom all season. Consider *Torenia* an annual although it is not uncommon for it to survive our winters or reseed itself.

*I really like the look of Canna Lilies, but know them to be invasive. Can you suggest a way to keep them confined to where I plant them?*

Unfortunately, the only way to keep Cannas from spreading beyond your desired location is to dig and divide them. Fortunately, there are a couple of things you can do to make this task easier. If you want to plant Cannas in a single spot in your flower bed this is a good opportunity to recycle a used nursery pot. I have taken a 15 gallon nursery pot, buried it in my landscape where I wanted my Cannas then filled the pot with soil and planted the Cannas in the center of the buried pot. When I saw the expanded clump pushing on all sides of the buried pot, I knew it was time to dig and divide. The buried pot kept the Cannas from multiplying beyond what I could control. I have also used them in a linear pattern by using a buried length of metal landscape edging on both sides of my planting, connecting at the ends. Over time you may get some escapes that grow under the edging or the edging may weaken with age, but it keeps them in check for a few years and makes digging and dividing easier.

*I have Sago Palms that look sick. The fronds are yellowing and they have white flakes on the leaves that look like drops of paint. Is this some kind of disease and how do I cure it?*

It sounds like you've got Cycad scale. This is becoming more prevalent and has even led to quarantines in Texas nurseries in recent years. This is a sucking insect that can do significant damage to your Sago Palm if not caught and controlled quickly. Since we are in the middle of summer, I would recommend using any liquid insecticide containing Acephate or Malathion as the active ingredient. This should solve the problem in one or two applications. Using a granular or liquid drench insecticide containing the ingredient Imidicloprid would provide greater long term control but would not work as quickly as the spray. More environmentally friendly products like Ultra-Fine Oil or Bonide All Seasons Horticultural Oil can be used to control scale but should not be used when our temperatures will be 90° or higher.