



INTO THE WOODS

Offering seclusion, romance and mystery, verdant woodland plants bring a wild atmosphere to gardens large or small throughout the year

WOODLAND GARDENS

In late winter, this glade by Garden Design Company has carpets of *Cyclamen coum* under the trees for seasonal colour



Few natural habitats capture the imagination quite as much as woodland does. Abundant with birdsong and full of possibilities down every winding path, it's little wonder many of us seek to recreate the feeling of being among the trees in our own gardens.

As well as an enchanting atmosphere, a canopy of trees – even just one or two – can help you create a sense of seclusion. ‘We want to feel enveloped and cocooned,’ says designer Andrew Staib of Glorious Gardens. ‘After a day staring at screens, lush and relaxed is what we are after.’

With hotter summers and wilder winters, woodland planting in part or all of your garden is also a wise choice. ‘Trees reduce noise and pollution levels, create shade and cooler temperatures, and provide a degree of protection from strong winds and rain,’ says Katarzyna Rzepinska, botanical horticulturist at Royal Botanic Gardens, Kew.

SCOPE OUT YOUR SITE

Whether you're making use of an already tree-filled spot or starting from scratch, soil and shade are the two most important factors to figure out in a woodland garden. ‘We suggest considering the following four conditions: full shade, partial shade, well-drained soil and moist soil,’ says the team at specialist shade plant nursery Moore & Moore Plants. ‘Once you can determine which you have in your garden, you can choose the plants. The most challenging condition in the woodland garden is full shade with well-drained soil, which will need to be improved.’

CREATE YOUR STRUCTURE

As the most significant element, trees will be your natural place to begin when planning, but they're not the only thing you'll need to consider. ‘Structures are important too. In winter, mosses and lichens create interest, so you should provide somewhere for these to flourish – a stone cairn, a tree stump, or a pile of logs in the shade,’ suggests Sue Mabberley, owner of Nant y Bedd, a garden in the Brecon Beacons. Similarly, James Scott, principal designer at The Garden Company, suggests making use of the materials that are already there: ‘Re-use surplus logs as stepping stones or as curved log walls.’

WELCOME IN WATER

Adding water to your woodland garden will reflect the canopy above, provide a damp habitat for shade and moisture-loving plants, such as hostas, and enhance the

tranquil atmosphere. ‘It's important that your water source is shallow, ideally with gradual and textured edges, so that any wildlife that climbs in can get out safely,’ says James Scott. ‘If you don't have the space or resources to add a pond, then a running water feature or even a bird bath can bring added interest to the space.’

PLANT FOR ALL SEASONS

Most agree that woodland gardens are at their best in spring, when flowers can bloom without the shade of the tree canopy. ‘Choose favourites such as native bluebells and primroses, carpets of wood sorrel, ferns unfurling, ground cover of wild strawberries, and sweet cicely bursting into life,’ says Sue Mabberley.

‘Later on you can have geraniums for shade – *Geranium phaeum* and *G. sylvaticum* – and evergreens for structure, including ferns, *Tiarelles* and *Saxifraga*,’ recommends Julie Moore, owner of Penlan Perennials nursery. ‘You can then add bulbs like *Erythronium* and *Arisaema* if you want a more exotic look.’

‘When choosing plants, test the acidity of the soil, as some woodland plants will only grow successfully in soil with a higher acidity pH of 4.5 to 6,’ says David Glass, head gardener at Bowood in Wiltshire. ‘However, you can always include acid-loving rhododendrons and azaleas in pots containing ericaceous compost.’

CONSIDER SMALLER SPACES

You can still capture the essence of a woodland garden in a small area. ‘Imagine a weeping birch tree, a couple of evergreen shrubs and a carpet of ferns with bluebells and snowdrops,’ says designer Andrew Staib. The key is to avoid too much going on. ‘Keep your palette simple and plant in swathes to mimic a woodland setting,’ says designer Jasmine Burgess at Preston Bissett Nurseries.

LOW-MAINTENANCE OPTION

In comparison to other styles, a woodland garden, which benefits from a certain wildness, asks for relatively little once established. A bit of upkeep, mainly in the winter months, is all that's needed. ‘It's important to manage light levels by judicious pruning,’ says Richard Squires, head gardener at Antony Woodland Garden in Cornwall. ‘A glade in dappled shade can soon become very dark with shrubs reaching up for the light if not managed. Undergrowth also needs to be cut or strimmed at least annually, so the specimen plants don't get swamped.’

TOP RIGHT This corner of a larger garden by James Scott of The Garden Company has an *Acer palmatum* maple shading a wildlife-friendly pond

RIGHT In this sheltered area of Dyffryn Fernant garden in Pembrokeshire, a water feature, potted acers and mossy boulders create a Japanese-style haven





ABOVE *Zantedeschia aethiopica* can brighten up shady woodland areas and are generally hardy if given a winter mulch

RIGHT In this scheme by Garden Design Company, drifts of Iris 'Flight of Butterflies' thrive under *Salix tortuosa*

FEATURE HEATHER MARSHALL PHOTOGRAPHS (GARDEN DESIGN COMPANY) MARK LORD; (DYFFRYN FERNANT) GETTY IMAGES

