

# TOUGH PLANTS FOR TOUGH LOCATIONS



**Gardening can present challenges to plant growers but some locations are especially difficult.** To create a garden in these places, you need varieties that tolerate conditions inhospitable to most plants. Native plants are often the best options because they're already adapted to the area. These appealing choices will help you get started searching for tough plants for your tough spots.

## DRY SHADE

**Conditions:** A dense canopy of trees or tall buildings block out sunlight and keep moisture from reaching the soil below.

**Korean Spice viburnum** (*Viburnum carlesii*) is a compact, deciduous shrub with fragrant, waxy pink blooms that fade to white in spring and bright red berries in fall. The foliage becomes red and burgundy in autumn.

**Lenten rose** (*Hellebore spp.*) are perennial flowers that bloom in late winter to early spring in shades of white, cream, yellow, green, red, and purple, and the blossoms can have single or double rows of petals

**Lungwort** (*Pulmonaria spp.*) bears bright blue, pink, white, and purple flowers in spring. The thick, leathery foliage can be solid or spotted.

**Periwinkle** (*Vinca minor*) is a fast-growing ground cover that bears bright blue flowers in even the driest, shadiest spots. It's ideal where grass won't grow beneath tall trees.

## DAMP SHADE

**Conditions:** Sunlight is limited or even non-existent and the soil remains consistently moist throughout the growing season.

**Astilbe** (*Astilbe spp.*) thrives in the shade, opening feathery plumes of white, pink, or red flowers in summer. The dark green, fern-like foliage looks attractive all season.

**Beebalm** (*Monarda didyma*), a native perennial of eastern woodlands, this plant bears clusters of bright red, tubular flowers from late spring into summer. It's a nectar source for hummingbirds as well as bees and other pollinators.

**Maidenhair fern** (*Adiantum pedatum*) fills your shady spot with fans of delicate leaflets on thin, black, wiry stems all season long. A native variety, it will gradually spread from year to year.

**Virginia sweetspire** (*Itea virginica*) is a native deciduous shrub with spires of white flowers that droop from arching branches. The leaves turn red to purple in fall.

## HEAVY CLAY

**Conditions:** Soil too dense for roots to break through easily.

**Blue false indigo** (*Baptisia australis*) has beautiful purplish-blue, lupine-like flower spikes in late spring aboveground, while below the deep and fleshy root systems reach into the clay soil.

**Prairie dock** (*Silphium terebinthinaceum*) has thick taproots that bore deep into the clay as towering stems (up to 10 feet) grow above them, bearing sunflower-like flowers in summer.

**Smooth hydrangeas** (*Hydrangea arborescens*), sometimes called "wild hydrangeas," are native shrubs that grow naturally in clay soil. They typically reach to 3 to 6 feet tall, bloom with clusters of tiny white flowers in late spring, and have strong, sturdy stems that don't flop, even after heavy summer rains.

**Rose of Sharon** (*Hibiscus syriacus*) is a large (up to 12 feet tall) shrub that grows well in heavy clay soil. Its tropical-looking blossoms in white, red, pink, lavender, blue, and bicolors appear in midsummer.





## SANDY SOIL

**Conditions:** Loose soil that holds little moisture or nutrients.

**Black Chokeberry** (*Aronia melanocarpa*) is a small native shrub with a vase-like shape that spreads slowly to form a thicket. The small, white, open-faced flowers bloom in spring, followed by blackish-purple fruits that feed a wide range of birds.

**Black Eyed Susan** (*Rudbeckia spp.*), common in many home landscapes, grows well in dry, sandy soil. The yellow daisy-like flowers with black centers bloom profusely from midsummer to early fall.

**Sedum** (*Sedum spp.*), also called stonecrop, is a hardy succulent adapted to soil that has little moisture or nutrients. 'Autumn Joy' is a popular variety that opens its large clusters of deep pink flowers at the end of summer.

**Russian sage** (*Perovskia atriplicifolia*) isn't a true sage, but it has spikes of purple-blue flowers that look like sage from midsummer to fall. It grows best in sunny, dry conditions.

## ROCKY SOIL

**Conditions:** Large stones and small pebbles take up most of the space with pockets of topsoil in between. Water drains away quickly and nutrients are in short supply.

**Candytuft** (*Iberis sempervirens*) is a shallow-rooted ground cover that forms a 6- to 12-inch-tall mound of foliage that gradually spreads over nearby stones. Its clusters of small white flowers appear in early spring and can last for weeks.

**Hens-and-Chicks** (*Sempervivum spp.*) is a hardy succulent with fleshy leaves that grow in rosettes and come in many shades of green, often with reddish highlights. It works its way into the spaces between rocks.

**Creeping juniper** (*Juniperus horizontalis*), a low-growing evergreen shrub, is often used as a ground cover in rocky soil. The foliage is typically green to blue-green during the growing season, with purple tones appearing in winter from year to year.

**Staghorn sumac** (*Rhus typhina*) is a large shrub or small tree, reaching 10 to 15 feet tall and wide. A native of rocky soils throughout the eastern U.S., it has large medium green leaves that turn bright red in fall, small yellow to greenish

## ALKALINE SOIL

**Conditions:** Soil pH is higher than 7.5

**Flowering tobacco** (*Nicotiana glauca*) is an annual in the mid-Atlantic that grows 3 to 5 feet tall and features dangling clusters of trumpet-shaped, white or pink flowers with a sweet scent from midsummer to fall.

**Thyme** (*Thymus spp.*) is both a culinary and ornamental herb that comes in many varieties that fare well in alkaline soil. Most are low-growing, with dark green foliage and tiny white flowers.

**Yarrow** (*Achillea*) grows well in almost any soil type, with clusters of flat-topped flowers in white, yellow, pink, or red from summer to early fall. It attracts butterflies and many pollinators.

**Cotoneaster** (*Cotoneaster lucidus*), often referred to as the hedge cotoneaster, holds up well in wind-blown areas as well as in high-pH soil. Its small pinkish white blooms appear in mid-spring and the foliage turns yellow to red in the fall. The berries ripen to black in the fall and remain on the shrub for most of winter.





## ACIDIC SOIL

**Conditions:** Soil pH is lower than 6.5

**Daylilies** (*Hemerocallis spp.*) include a diverse group of varieties that bear trumpet-shaped flowers in a wide range of hues from late spring to late summer. All fare well in acidic soil.

**Fothergilla** (*Fothergilla gardenii*), commonly known as witch alder or dwarf fothergilla, is a deciduous native shrub that grows well in full sun or shade as long as the soil is acidic. Its fragrant, white to yellow, bottlebrush-shaped flowers appear in spring.

**Rhododendrons** (*Rhododendron spp.*), like their close relatives azaleas, thrive in soil with a pH as low as 5, which few other plants tolerate. They open their bell-shaped, often fragrant, pink, purple, red, yellow, or white flowers in early to midspring.

**Mountain Laurel** (*Kalmia latifolia*) is a thicket-forming native shrub or small tree with a short, crooked trunk; a compact, rounded crown; and large, bell-shaped, white to pink flowers with deep rose spots inside. The Pennsylvania state plant, mountain laurel hosts many species of birds and caterpillars.

## LEARN MORE

[University of Minnesota:  
30 Plants for Tough Sites](#)

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