

- **The balcony in my new condo is in 24-hour shade. Can you suggest a few plants or shrubs that could handle both living in pots and constant shade?**

There are several shrubs, evergreens and plants that will grow in containers in full shade but there are some challenges to overcome in this environment.

First, have a good look at your space and determine where you would like your balcony garden: in a corner, along a railing, vertically up a wall, hanging from the ceiling, etc., The size, shape and materials available for container gardening are endless and range from store bought pots and planters to salvaged items like buckets, old sinks, even bathtubs and old drawers. Whatever you choose, make sure it has proper drainage, is not made of toxic material and is the right size for the plant you are potting.

One of the biggest challenges with container gardening is to get the watering right. There can be challenges on both ends of the spectrum. Because plants are ‘contained’ in a smaller space they will dry out fast and will need to be watered regularly. However, it is also important to ensure adequate drainage. Holes drilled into the bottom of the container with some permeable material underneath the soil will help to guard against ‘wet feet’. A good quality potting mix should be used and not regular garden mix. Potting mix is a blend of growing medium that allows for aeration, good drainage and proper nutrients. You may need to amend with a good quality compost when nutrients become depleted.

Twenty-four hours of shade as well as the size and shape of the container does limit the choices of plants. Look for plants that do well in full shade and have a slow rate of growth unless you want to repot to bigger containers regularly. There are many plants that fit this bill. Some grasses, ferns, and shrubs enjoy full shade - look for ones that work well together. One of my favourites is a forest grass called hakonechloa of which there are several varieties. They have a beautiful texture and movement and look great in a container. Creeping Jenny, hosta and some ferns will grow in total shade as well. For colour, you could try fuschia, hellebore, coleus, begonia, impatience, astilbe and lily of the valley, bears breach (‘Acanthus mollis’), some campanula, etc. These are just a few suggestions to get you started but look for tags that say ‘full shade’ and plants that have interesting textures and differing sizes and colours that work well together and will provide visual interest. Evergreen shrubs such as Tauntan Yew, taxus x media ‘Tauntonii’ will add height and texture and will do well in full shade.

In summary, while challenging, it is possible to have an interesting and beautiful display of plants that grow well in containers in full shade. Determine placement on your balcony ensuring protection from the elements such as wind, find containers that are the right size for what you are planting, look for plants that grow in ‘full shade’, use a good quality potting mix in a pot with good drainage, manage water requirements – not too much, not too little, ensure proper nutrients and repot as the plant outgrows its space. Experiment with size, texture, colour, and movement to create a pleasing container garden and enjoy!

Sources:

https://web.extension.illinois.edu/containergardening/choosing_drainage.cfm

<https://extension.unh.edu/blog/2020/01/what-best-soil-potted-plants>

<https://plants.ces.ncsu.edu/plants/hakonechloa-macra/>

<https://www.rhs.org.uk/garden-design/shade-gardening>

<https://plants.ces.ncsu.edu/plants/hakonechloa-macra-aureola/>

<https://hort.extension.wisc.edu/articles/golden-creeping-jenny-lysimachia-nummularia-aurea/>