

# SOLOMON'S SEALS FOR THE SHADE

By Shirley Froehlich, BSA

Shade gardens are a sharp contrast to sunny gardens. They offer relaxing, serene surroundings and a cool, comfortable environment on hot, sunny days. My gardening philosophy is to go with the flow, so if you have lots of shade, embrace it.

Shade gives you a whole new palette of plants to choose from. One group of native woodland wildflowers that thrive in shady gardens are the Solomon's Seals. I currently grow three kinds, small, medium and large.

## DESCRIPTION

The Solomon's Seals are members of the Lily family. These perennials grow from spreading rootstalks to form thick groundcovers. Although they are slower to establish than the sun loving prairie wildflowers, these plants have staying power. They simply get thicker each year and live for many years.

**Two Leaf Solomon's Seal** *Maianthemum canadense* is the smallest of the group growing 5-15cm tall (3"-6"). The leaves are heart shaped to oval and there are usually 2 leaves per stem. The white flowers are in 1-2 cm clusters at the tip of the stem. These fragrant flowers bloom in June and are followed by speckled berries which turn red when ripe. It is also called Wild Lily of the Valley and Canada Mayflower.

**Star Flowered Solomon's Seal** *Smilacina stellata* is a mid size plant growing 20-50 cm tall (8"-20"). It forms a dense groundcover once established. The narrow, lance shaped leaves are 3-12 cm long (2"-5") and arranged alternately in 2 rows along the stem. Loose clusters of starry, white flowers appear at the tips of arching, leafy stems in June. They are followed by greenish berries with black stripes which ripen to dark red. It is also called False Solomon's Seal. The new latin name is *Maianthemum stellatum*.

**Solomon's Seal** *Polygonatum biflorum* is the largest of this group reaching up to 90 cm in height (3 ft.). It emerges from the ground a week later than Star Flowered Solomon's Seal in the spring. The leaves are up to 10 cm wide (4") and 15 cm long (6") and are arranged alternately along the stem. Little bunches of white, bell shaped flowers dangle beneath elegant, arching stems in June. The berries ripen to navy blue in summer and fall.

## NATIVE HABITAT

**Two Leaf Solomon's Seal** is common in rich, moist woods and dry, sandy woods. It grows throughout the prairie provinces and up to north eastern B.C. and south western Nunavet. It also grows throughout eastern Canada and the north eastern U.S. I have seen large patches of it growing in Sandilands Provincial Forest and at Grand Beach in Manitoba.

**Star Flowered Solomon's Seal** is very common in moist to dry soil in open woodlands and meadows, and on riverbanks and lakeshores. It grows across Canada

including north and west to southern Nunavut and central Yukon. It also extends throughout the northern U.S. I have seen it in fields and among trees in the Manitoba Interlake and in Assiniboine Forest in Winnipeg.

**Solomon's Seal** is fairly common in moist to dry woodlands in the very southern portions of Manitoba. The rest of its range includes the SE corner of Saskatchewan, the southern tips of Ontario and Quebec and the eastern half of the U.S. I have seen it growing near Selkirk, at Bird's Hill Park and near Carman in Manitoba.

## CULTURE

All of the Solomon's Seals do best in part to full shade and rich, moist soil. However, they are quite well adapted to drier, sandier soil as well. These plants are great as groundcover under shade trees, on the shady side of buildings or in shady flower beds. If you are tired of mowing grass and raking leaves around trees you can plant these plants one foot apart under the trees. Over 3-5 years the plants will fill in to form a beautiful, lush woodland garden that looks great and doesn't need mowing.

Put mulch down such as woodchips or flax straw when planting to keep the weeds down until the plants fill the space. In autumn let the falling leaves remain on the plants to top up the mulch every year. This helps hold the moisture in the soil as well as providing nutrients as the leaves break down. Leaves are also great spider habitat. Spiders are beneficial bugs that feed on insect pests in the garden. They help to keep the garden in balance. There is no raking required in a woodland garden!

Every spring new shoots will poke up through the leaves and before you know it the area will be filled in. When planting on the shady side of a building or in a shady flower bed, simply dump 4-6" of leaves on the woodland plants every year in late October or November. Get them from other parts of your yard or from your neighbours. Oak leaves are great for this.

The best way to establish Solomon's Seals is to set plants out in the garden anytime from spring through fall. They can also be grown from seed but you need to be patient. Like many other members of the Lily family, they are quite challenging to grow from seed because they are very slow. If seeded outside in fall, they take 2 years to germinate. To speed them up you can give them a warm, cool treatment. After collecting seed in September, clean it, seed in trays and keep warm at 21 degrees for 3 months, then keep cool at 1-5 degrees for 3 months and then move outdoors in late April to sprout. Even after germination occurs they are slow. I generally sell them as 3 year old plants or more. Solomon's Seal and Star Flowered Solomon's Seal can also be propagated by division quite easily.

Springtime in the garden is a wonderful time of year. At a time of year when annuals have just been planted, these frost tolerant Solomon's Seals are already up and starting to bloom. They are a reward for a job well done and inspiration for the new gardening season.

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