

# Insight on Sunlight

*Texas A&M AgriLife Extension Service — Galveston County Office*



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**PHOTO CREDIT: William M. Johnson**

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It's certainly a tribute to the horticulture industry that so many plant lines

have been developed to provide gardeners with a wide array of options for a wide array of design possibilities. The labels on potted plants provide a lot of valuable information for the gardener including common name, botanical name, reasonably accurate plant dimensions at maturity as well as helpful planting and

care information.

We are familiar with Nutrition Facts labels found on most food packages in the United States. However, plant labels are not regulated by federal or state agencies and they do fall somewhat short when it comes to standardization in





meaning of such terms as full sun, sun, part sun and part shade.

Light is one of the most important elements in growing any plant. Light is also the primary element that we have least control over in the landscape.

If a sun-loving plant doesn't receive enough sun, it will likely produce less foliage and fewer blooms. If a shade-loving plant receives too much sun, the foliage may wilt and scorch. Either way, a plant is put under a lot of stress when trying to grow under unfavorable lighting conditions.

Unfortunately, exact science is not at play here as there are always other factors to consider such as the orientation of the plant in reference to the sun's location throughout the day and whether or not the plant is heat and drought tolerant.

There are many different definitions of full sun, sun, part sun and part shade. Add to that the different light conditions in each individual landscape and you have a very confusing situation. I find it useful to define the conditions as follows and then assess each site in the landscape from there.

**Full Sun:** Full sun means just that—nothing blocks the sunshine from dawn to sunset.

**Sun:** One would likely think that sun would imply exposure to full

sun. In application, this term describes places that receive direct sunlight for at least 6 hours or more each day, including some or all of the midday hours. Examples would be sites with little or no tree cover and/or western exposures.

**Part Sun/Part Shade:** Direct sun for at least 4-6 hours per day. Sites with eastern exposure or those shaded in afternoon by large trees or buildings.

**Shade:** Less than 4 hours of sun per day. Generally considered to be in areas under mature trees or where buildings block sunlight most of the day.

To determine what exposure you have for any site you should observe the site at various times during the day. Figure out when the site is in shade or sun; determine the number of hours of sunshine and the time periods when sunshine hits your site.

Morning sun for six hours will be acceptable for many sun or part sun plants while four hours of afternoon sun could cause leaf burn and bleaching on part sun or shade loving plants. Watch your plants for signs their light requirements are not being met. Long leggy growth is a sign that the plant is not getting enough sun, while red (sunburned) or pale (bleached) leaves might mean too much sun.

Placing plants is an ideal location is not likely to be a major issue in most instances but if otherwise properly planted plants struggle over their first growing season, assessing their actual light exposure in your landscape would be a first priority.

I admit to struggling for some time to establish a bed of dancing ladies ginger (*Globba winitii*) in what I thought should be an ideal location that was shady. After dividing the plants one fall many years ago, I moved half of the clumps to an even more shaded site and replanted the remaining half in the same bed where the clumps were harvested.

The clumps that were relocated to an even more shaded area (on the north side of the house vs. the north side of an eight-foot tall wood fence) managed to produce robust foliage and an abundance of blooms.

The difference in sun exposure was not that exceptional but that was my estimation. However, the dancing ladies ginger could definitely tell—and really responded to—the difference and that's all that mattered. Just remember, part of the fun of gardening is learning to work with nature, not against it!

