

# A shade too hot

From pergolas to birch trees, *Anna Pavord* outlines the best ways we can keep cool in our gardens during times of excessive heat



Wisteria draped over a gazebo shades a dining table  
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Heatwaves such as the one July brought are not regular enough in Britain for us to plan for them in our gardens. It's different in Italy, where baking hot summers are a norm. In Italy there will be a pergola covered with vines to make a shady spot for lunch. There will be a place to go to in the evening when the sun is lower in the sky and throws long, thin shadows of cypresses over baked grass. As always, we can learn from Italy.

I'm thinking of a house near Siena we once rented where every evening we gathered on a terrace surrounded by a low retaining wall. The terrace

extended away from a stone outbuilding, which provided a backing wall. A rough shelter jutted out from this wall, supported on three pine props as fat as telegraph poles. The roof was made from rolls of reed; two thicknesses with a layer of plastic sheeting in between. You couldn't see the plastic but it gave the roof a longer life than it would otherwise have had.

The terrace worked because it was generous and comfortable. A three-sided seat (stucco topped with tiles) ran round the shelter at the same height as the retaining walls. Big cushions covered in tough ticking spread over the

seat, and a stone table topped with terracotta tiles provided the necessary resting place for drinks, lanterns and dishes of grapes. It faced east, so in the evening it was deliciously shaded. During the rest of the day the reed roof kept off the overhead sun.

All gardens need places to sit (although all gardeners say the same thing — as soon you sit you see a job that needs doing). One of these is likely to be close to the house and used mostly during the summer, particularly in the evenings. Depending on which way it faces, the house itself may provide sufficient shade. If not you can plan some kind of shelter such as we had in Italy, which, although you won't be using it in the same way, will still look good in winter.

A friend whose garden I went to see on one of the hottest days of the heatwave had invested, expensively, in a different solution. She had a handsome awning fitted on the side of the house to provide instant shade at the flick of a switch. It was impressive, stretching over the terrace where they most often sit and rolling itself neatly back into a long, narrow tube when it wasn't needed. It was made from a plain, creamy material, easier on the eye than stripes. Nationwide Home Innovations has the details ([nationwideld.co.uk](http://nationwideld.co.uk)).

I could see how an awning might be a smart solution in the kind of small courtyard garden that is often all the

space allows in new developments. Fitted over double doors leading from inside to outside, it would provide the shade that in a larger garden you might expect to get from a tree. And an awning stores itself away. You don't need to dismantle it and find space for it during the off-season, as you do with umbrellas and canvas sails. But in a garden made mostly of green, clipped evergreens I do love the brilliant colours of an Indian parasol. Check out the possibilities at Etsy ([etsy.com](https://www.etsy.com)).

A tree, if you have room, provides shade of a most useful kind, because the shadow it casts moves around with the sun. At midday the shadow is smallest, the tree casting a neat circle on the ground, each detail of this strong vertical transformed into a flat horizontal. As the sun swings round, the tree shadow slithers round too, lengthening, distorting, until eventually it is subsumed in the general shade of evening. You move round with it. An old-fashioned circular tree seat can provide shady comfort at any hour of the day. Andrew Crace ([andrewcrace.com](https://www.andrewcrace.com)) makes them to order.

It won't provide an instant solution to this summer's heat, but you could think about planting a tree this autumn to get it established before next summer's heatwave comes along. But which tree? The need for shade may be



uppermost in your mind at the moment but you'll be thinking about other benefits too: shelter and food for insects and birds, blossom and fruit for you. Silver birch does not have meaningful blossom or fruit but it does have splendid pale bark; some, such as *Betula papyrifera*, have superb catkins at least four inches long. In a small garden a birch's lack of weightiness is an advantage and the leaves move well in a breeze, but in growth it tends to go up rather than out. For shade you need the "out" and that is why I love apple trees in a garden. They will give you blossom, fruit and, after a while, somewhere to sling a hammock. Avoid dwarfing kinds.

For a gardener the best way to deal with a heatwave (if you can) is to adjust the hours that you garden and, as Noël Coward warned, avoid the midday sun. That is when it is most difficult to find shade.

With us, at the moment, the sun rises soon after 5am and, though our valley is already bathed in sunshine, it is deliciously cool. The shadows are long and the plants in the garden have not yet got that collapsed look they acquire as the temperature zooms up towards the thirties.

For us there's a new delight in the early morning too, because for the first time house martins have built a mud nest just above the bedroom window. We've always had swallows here, nesting in the woodshed and elsewhere, but never house martins. The birds are twittering and on the wing with the sunrise, and without even getting out of bed I can watch their shadows flickering against the embrasure of the window as they go backwards and forwards to their nest. Shadow play. Here's hoping it's a play with a happy ending. ■

