



Tiarella 'Starfish'

EVER since my romance with plants began 25 years ago, I have been driven to collect and breed hardy plants with gorgeous leaves. Among my favorites are foamflowers (*Tiarella* spp. and cvs.), natives of woodlands across North America and in Asia. But exceptional foliage isn't their only strong point. It's the contrast of frothy flowers against bold, maplelike leaves that makes them so worthy of attention.

Recently, hybridizers have lifted their paintbrushes to concentrate on this little group of lovely plants. Their newest selections and hybrids bloom longer, produce more and showier flowers, and often rebloom. Tough, evergreen in USDA Hardiness Zone 6 and higher, and tolerant of the deepest shade, these superior foamflower hybrids are finding a home next to hostas in many gardens.

FOAMFLOWERS OFFER BOTH FRAGRANCE AND COLOR

Foamflowers are aptly named. Wandering through the woods where these plants occur naturally, you can spy mounds of whitish, feathery flowers the color of sea foam in spring. Foam-

Fascinating Foamflowers

These perennials enhance woodland landscapes with frothy blooms and ornamental foliage

by Dan Heims



Author Dan Heims and others have recently introduced a host of new foamflower hybrids.

flower blossoms are sometimes accented with a pale-pink or peachy cast, and breeders are working on developing brighter flower colors. 'Spring Symphony' is the hybrid that sports the brightest pink flowers reported to date.

Some foamflowers are mildly fragrant. I sometimes liken their fragrance to

that of cheap cologne, but I like that smell. The most fragrant hybrid I have sniffed is 'Eco Red Velvet'. Of the cultivars I've hybridized, 'Iron Butterfly' is tops in the aroma arena.

Flowering starts very early with foamflowers, sometimes preceding spring bulbs, and the flowers appear to be

most tolerant. The naturally occurring foamflower species are strictly spring bloomers, but some superior hybrids, like 'Summer Snow', bloom throughout the summer. 'Cygnet' and especially 'Iron Butterfly' may even flower until heavy frosts begin.

The new hybrids show astounding leaf shapes with vivid markings. Their leaves, while still maple leaf shaped, can have dramatically elongated lobes with ruffles, splashes, or bold black blotches as adornment. Their leaf edges can be parquely ornate or smooth as silk, and the lobes may overlap like a pinwheel ('Crow Feather') or lie open like the wings of a butterfly ('Iron Butterfly').

These woodlanders have a second season of color in fall and winter, when their leaves can turn orangey-bronze, as seen in 'Tiger Stripe', or purple-black, as seen in 'Ninja'. Late-season leaf color is an element to remember when planning fall border or container combinations, especially since the bronzes and burgundies of foamflowers combine so well with orange and red mums and other plants in Halloween colors.

CHOOSE FOAMFLOWERS WITH THE FORM YOU NEED

Foamflowers can be clumpers, runners, or semi-runners. Clumpers remain well behaved, forming mounds that slowly increase in size and become more floriferous as time progresses. In contrast, runners are wildly stoloniferous, overtaking large areas in a single season with their lovely netted leaves. Semi-runners, which I also call creepers, are intermediate in habit, spreading perhaps 18 inches in a year's time.

Clumping types look good planted en masse in the shade border or as specimens, either in containers or in the garden. Running types can be used as "weavers," intermixed with hostas or other bold shade plants. Semi-runners make an excellent ground cover, as they are dense enough to smother weeds. They also make fine container plants,

FOAMFLOWERS

Tiarella spp.
(Tee-a-REL-la)

- A genus of five woodland perennials native to North America and Asia, foamflowers prefer evenly moist but well-drained soil with a high organic content and respond well to a yearly organic mulch.
- Foamflowers, which are hardy in Zones 4 through 9, are evergreen in Zone 6 and higher. Grow them in the shade in an area protected from drying winds.
- Powdery mildew is a non-lethal but disfiguring fungal disease that can mar foamflower leaves. Plants are occasionally bothered by vine weevils and strawberry root weevils.
- Propagate foamflowers by transplanting pieces of rhizome taken from parent plants in early spring. Hybrids will not come true from seed.

spilling over the edges of pots and blooming on both new and old growth.

Foamflowers are typically 12 to 16 inches tall in flower, but size varies. 'Spring Symphony' is just 8 to 10 inches tall in flower, but even the small varieties do spread. In general, clumpers will grow taller and fuller than runners.

As a rule, the running forms have the smallest, least-showy flowers. Semi-runners are close to clumpers in showiness, but nothing beats the floral display of a 2- to 3-year-old clumper.

As woodlanders, foamflowers grow best in a humus-rich soil, with ade-

quate moisture and good drainage. In Oregon, Pennsylvania, and West Virginia, however, I have seen native species of foamflowers growing in the wild, right at the edge of streams, sometimes clambering over moist rocks, competing with moss for the bits of soil that lodge in crevices.

In the Pacific Northwest, most varieties will grow in the deepest shade to full morning sun. Plants grown in afternoon sun will bleach during the summer but recover in fall with a full flush of foliage, showing excellent vigor and bronzing. In other areas where the sun is more intense, gardeners need to keep foamflowers in shady spots.

Since foamflowers are hardy (growing in Zones 4 to 9) and resistant to heat and humidity, I consider them one of the few perennials that can live in every climate except the desert Southwest. Foamflower roots usually penetrate the soil shallowly, limiting their drought tolerance. You'll get improved results by amending soil with generous amounts of humus before planting.

Tiarella hybridizer Sinclair Adam, Jr., suggests that where soils lack calcium and magnesium, such as in the eastern United States, foamflowers will benefit from dolomitic limestone and small amounts of Epsom salts applied to the soil to make up the deficit. Although limestone will raise soil pH, foamflowers thrive in a fairly wide pH range, from 5.5 to 7.5.

POWDERY MILDEW PREVENTION

Mix 1 tablespoon of baking soda, 2½ tablespoons of summerweight horticultural oil, and 1 gallon of water. Pour into the spray equipment of your choice; agitate gently before each use. Spray foamflowers with this solution once a week during the growing season to prevent powdery mildew.



Tiarella 'Dark Eyes'



Tiarella 'Heronwood Mist'



Tiarella 'Mint Chocolate'



Tiarella 'Black Snowflake'

RECOMMENDED FOR EXCEPTIONAL FOLIAGE

Name	Habit	Rebloomer/Long bloomer	Description
'Arpeggio'	Clumper	No	Unusually long, deeply cut, maple-shaped leaves with maroon blotches. Light-pink flowers.
'Black Snowflake'	Clumper	No	Very dramatic, deeply cut foliage that looks like a black snowflake when new. Strong constitution.
'Cygnet'	Clumper	Rebloomer	Velvety leaves shaped like a swan in flight inspired the name. Profuse, fragrant, pink flowers.
'Heronwood Mist'	Clumper	Rebloomer	Layers of cool pink, cream, and green that settle like a mist over broad leaves. Light-pink flowers.
'Inkblot'	Clumper	No	Leaves with immense black patches. Tight habit. Masses of lightly fragrant, pink-tinted flowers.
'Iron Butterfly'	Clumper	Long bloomer (6 months)	Striking, heavily cut foliage and beautiful form. Large, fragrant flowers, white tipped with light pink.
'Jeepers Creepers'	Semi-runner	Light rebloomer	Bold, well-marked foliage and creeping habit. Large light-pink flowers.
'Mint Chocolate'	Clumper	Light rebloomer	Unusually long, green, maple-shaped leaves with a chocolate overlay. Toffee-tinted flowers.
'Neon Lights'	Clumper	Light rebloomer	Huge, black, palmate leaves edged in vivid green. Large light-pink flowers.
'Running Tapestry'	Runner	No	Rounded leaves adorned with a filigree of burgundy. Whitish flowers. Rapid spreader.

RECOMMENDED FOR EXCEPTIONAL FLOWERS

Name	Habit	Rebloomer/Long bloomer	Description
'Dark Eyes'	Semi-runner	Rebloomer	Large light-pink flowers; compact habit. Leaves marked with a black blotch. Bronze tones in winter.
'Eco Red Velvet'	Clumper	No	White flowers, the most fragrant of any cultivar. Leaves are entire with a velveteen finish.
'Lacquer Leaf'	Clumper	Light rebloomer	Flowers are kissed with pink and are lightly fragrant. Glossy leaves bronzing in winter.
'Spring Symphony'	Clumper	Light rebloomer	Astounding pink flowers. Leaves are compact, cut, and painted with black along the midrib.
'Starfish'	Clumper	Long bloomer (3-4 months)	Pink flowers. Starfish-shaped leaves marked with a burgundy blotch. Superior winter bronzing.
'Summer Snow'	Clumper	Long bloomer (3-4 months)	Tall branching stalks of small, dainty white flowers held above heart-shaped, unmarked leaves.
'Tiger Stripe'	Clumper	No	Compact pink flowers atop glossy green leaves that develop purple stripes and splashes in fall.

FOAMFLOWERS LOOK THEIR BEST AFTER THREE YEARS

Foamflowers are quite easy to maintain. I trim off flowers after blooming, and feed and mulch mine once a year. I have foamflower patches 15 feet wide that I feed with a balanced (14-14-14), timed-release fertilizer in late winter (early February for me) before growth comes on. I recommend using a micro-prill formula such as Apex 14-14-14 that releases nutrients in a very controlled way over the course of eight to nine months. A micro-prill fertilizer has particles a tenth the size of a regular granular fertilizer like Osmocote. For mulch, use aged manure or leaf mold, because these quickly contribute to the soil the humus foamflowers crave.

Some people prune winter-burned leaves off foamflowers, but I prefer to leave them on, as they protect buds from drying winter winds, which can top-kill plants. Foamflowers are often covered by fallen leaves in autumn and sprout through this layer in spring, but I like to expose their crowns to enjoy the earliest growth in February, when I am desperate for green in the garden.

Foamflowers are relatively free of diseases and pests, but some species and hybrids are prone to powdery mildew, especially after being drought-stressed.



Combine foamflowers with other woodland perennials, such as hostas and toad lilies.

For organic control of mildew, I spray the foliage with a baking soda and horticultural oil solution (see the recipe on p. 57). Chemical fungicides should be powder based, as petroleum-based formulas can burn foliage.

Vine weevil and strawberry root weevil are also occasional nemeses. Low-toxicity pyrethrins are effective against the adults if the timing is right. I spray at dusk and make two or three applications in late May to mid-June. Weevils can also be controlled by handpicking or by killing the larvae with parasitic nematodes in late summer.

Foamflowers look their best after two or three years. I divide large specimens very early in spring before the plants have leafed out, and simply push strong pieces of rhizome into fluffy soil to create a new plant.

Hybrids will not come true from seed, instead yielding seedlings that display a hodge-podge of leaf shapes, many inferior to those of the parent plant. Curious gardeners and aspiring plant breeders who want to take their chances anyway should sow fresh seed on top of moist, sterile seed-starting mix. Cover flats with clear plastic and maintain a temperature of 70°F. Ensure that the seed remains moist, and you

will see tiny seed leaves in three weeks. When seedlings have a pair of true leaves, prick them out into small pots and grow them on a few months before transplanting them into the garden.

COMBINE FOAMFLOWERS WITH OTHER WOODLANDERS

Foamflowers provide a lovely foil to spring bulbs, lungworts (*Pulmonaria* spp.), and hellebores (*Helleborus* spp.), which enjoy similar growing conditions. They make great companions for ferns and the more shade-tolerant types of coral bells, such as *Heuchera* 'Pewter Veil' and 'Mint Frost'. Another good cohort is native wild ginger (*Asarum canadense*), often seen running with foamflowers on moist, rocky slopes in the wild.

Foamflowers are usually in full leaf and flower before hostas are entirely unfurled and thus set the stage for the show to follow. Yet they continue to contribute to the garden with extended bloom in some varieties, rich and interesting leaves all summer, and beautiful bronzing in fall and winter. ♪

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SOURCES

Since many of the foamflower cultivars mentioned in this article are new to the trade, they may still be hard to find. The following mail-order retail nurseries offer the best selections of foamflowers available.

Carroll Gardens, 444 E. Main St., Westminster, MD 21157; 800-638-6334; www.carrollgardens.com; catalog, \$3.

Fraser's Thimble Farm, 175 Arbutus Rd., Salt Spring Island, BC V8K 1A3, Canada, 250-537-5788; www.thimblefarms.com; catalog, \$2.

Shady Oaks Nursery, 1101 S. State St., PO Box 708, Waseca, MN 56093; 800-504-8006; www.shadyoaks.com; catalog, free.

Woodside Gardens, 1191 Egg & I Rd., Chimacum, WA 98325; 360-732-4754; www.woodsidegardens.com; catalog, \$2.