

The Lesser Astilbes

Give your shade garden longer bloom and fascinating foliage with these little-used plants.

By Tom Krischan
Photos by Donna Krischan

On early mornings in spring, I rush to visit my backyard shade gardens in hopes of discovering the emergence of a new plant in bloom. On one such visit, my familiar *Trillium*, Solomon's Seal, and Jack-in-the-pulpit had given room to an unknown inflorescence. A 9-inch-tall spike held its attractive cluster of white flowers well above the plant's basal leaves. The bloom appeared similar to an *Astilbe*, but it was much smaller sized. What was this plant? Thus began my introduction to *Tiarella* and the diverse group of related plants that I call the lesser astilbes.

Within the plant family *Saxifragaceae*, the genus *Astilbe* is the most recognized and loved by shade gardeners. But there are many other genera in this family worthy of discovery. *Tiarella*, commonly called foamflower, is an early spring-blooming genus that produces bright and cheery flower spikes. Notable cultivars include 'Mint Chocolate' (PP11,379), 'Ink Blot', 'Iron Butterfly' (PP13,396) and 'Heronswood Mist'. Basal leaves resemble out-stretched fingers on the palm of a hand. The green leaves are slightly heart-shaped with varying degrees of dark markings along the midveins. Tiarellas look best in spring, as hot and dry summer weather will quickly take its toll on the foliage.

Heucheras have become the hot new plant for shade gardens. In the past, they had the common name of alumroot but are now most commonly called their scientific name.

Heucheras form round wavy leaves, which are often richly colored. Some varieties also have intricate leaf patterns. Flowers start blooming two to three weeks after *Tiarella* and usually persist into early summer. My favorite cultivars are 'Green Spice', with light greenish grey leaves and dark midveins; 'Lime Rickey' (PP16,210), with bright lime green leaves; 'Snowfire' (PPAF), with yellow green leaves containing darker green speckles; Dolce® 'Licorice', with dark burgundy leaves; and 'Starry Night' (PP16076), with dark leaves and a spectacular bloom of long-lasting white flower spikes. Other solid performers include 'Gypsy Dancer' (PP15959), 'Palace Purple', and 'Ring of Fire'.

Heuchera and *Tiarella* have been artificially crossed to pro-

duce the nothogenus *xHeucherella*. However, my field trials with cultivars "Birthday Cake' (PP16158), 'Chocolate Lace' (PP13701), and 'Sunspot' (PP14825) have been disappointing. They were not vigorous in my garden and several plants died out. I have witnessed *xHeucherella* 'Burnished Bronze' (PP12159) and 'Pink Frost' thriving in display beds at local garden centers, however.

The genus *Tellima*, of which there is only one North American species, is not well known. *Tellima grandiflora* and the cultivar 'Forest Frost' produce flower spikes similar to their *Heuchera* cousins. Their medium green leaves lack distinctive markings but are robust and persist well into fall.

Heuchera, *Tiarella*, and *Tellima* are North American natives, with *Tiarellas* being the smallest. Available in many local nurseries, many of these lesser astilbes were developed at Terra Nova Nurseries in Tigard, Ore.

A few genera in the family *Saxifragaceae* are medium-large. *Rodgersia* and *Peltoboykinia* can grow to 2 feet tall or more. Both genera are native to Asia. *Rodgersia aesculifolia* displays compound leaves that resemble those of a horse chestnut tree. Leaves have coarsely toothed edges. The leaf edges of *Rodgersia pinnata* 'Chocolate' (PPAF) are smooth. Observing the leaf edges is a great way to tell these two similar species apart. In late spring, both produce tall impressive flowering spikes. In

fall, the leaves develop a striking bronze color.

Another medium-large plant, *Peltoboykinia watanabei*, came to me through mail order from Plant Delights Nursery in Raleigh, N.C. An Asian species little seen in this country, its leaves are palmate and as big as an opened hand. Yellowish white flowers adorn

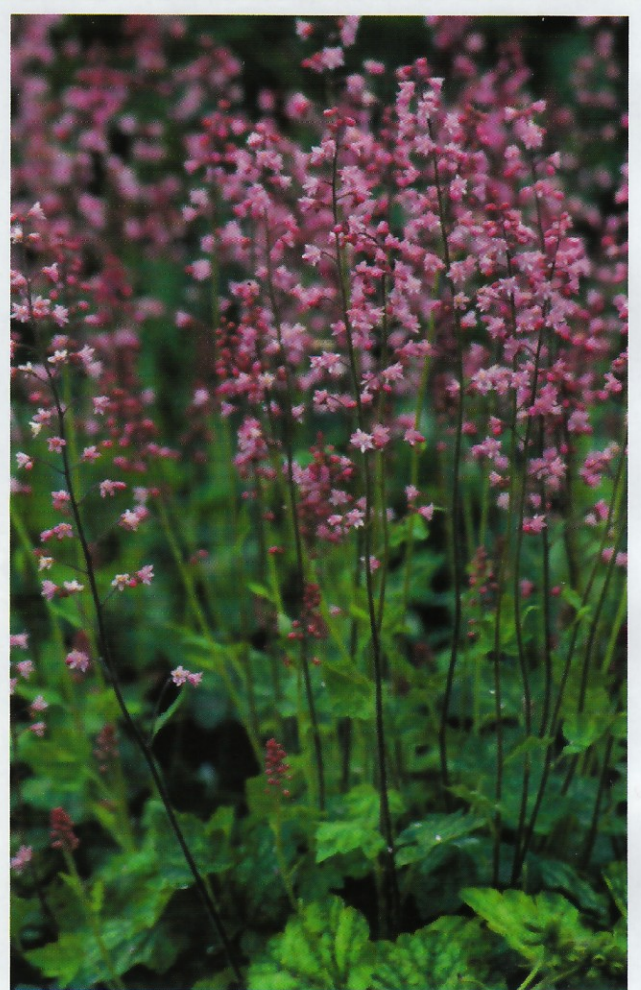
the 2-foot-tall spike for long periods in spring. A new addition to our garden, not yet bloomed, is *Darmera peltata*. Commonly called Indian rhubarb, it is a medium-large plant native to the West Coast. Leaves are round with edges that turn a fiery red in autumn. The bloom is a striking umbrella-shaped cluster of pink and white flowers.

Two genera that remain on my shade garden wish list are *Parnassia* and *Mitella*. I have observed both these Midwest

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Heuchera 'Palace Purple'



Heucherella 'Pink Frost'



Tiarella 'Inkblot'



Darmara peltata

the lesser astilbes

Care Tips

Richly organic but well-drained, soils are best for growing plants in this group. If your soil is mainly clay, dig in a few bags of compost and keep the bed slightly raised to promote water runoff. Standing water will rot their roots. Use a light application of pelleted, time-release fertilizer in spring. Balanced fertilizer like 20-20-20 works best.

These plants enjoy dappled light beneath the canopy of a deciduous tree. They thrive under full morning sunlight with late-afternoon shade. Heucheras are the most adaptable; they will grow under full sun and dry prairie-like conditions. Still, most grow best in part shade with medium soil moisture.

Heuchera, *Tiarella*, and *Tellima* are cold hardy to USDA Zone 3. *Astilbe*, *Rodgersia*, *Peltoboykinia*, and *Darmera* will need some winter protection in harsh northern gardens. For cold protection, cover the plants with insulating leaves or straw after the ground has frozen. Alternatively, my technique is to cover the plant beneath a 1-gallon or larger black plastic pot, place a brick on top for weight, and hope for a thick layer of snow cover. In spring, I just remove the pot and there is no messy cleanup.

—T.K.

natives in the wild and they are fascinating. *Parnassia glauca*, commonly called grass of Parnassus, produces intriguing green striped petals in late summer. Each flower is supported on a thin solitary stem that gives the illusion of blooms floating in midair. Bishop's Cap (*Mitella diphylla*) forms tiny white flowers held on a 1-foot tall spike. Upon close inspection, each flower appears as a snowflake with spectacular fringed petals.

There are dozens of varieties of the genus *Astilbe* available. Excellent plant choices include hybrids such as 'Bridal Veil', 'Peach Blossom', and 'Rheinland'. A number of species are represented such as *Astilbe arendsii* 'Deutschland', *Astilbe japonica* 'Vesuvius', 'Red Sentinel', and 'Elisabeth', and *Astilbe thunbergii* 'Ostrich Plume' and 'Straussenfeder'. Most plants bloom in June.

For even more variety and color in your shade garden, consider adding some fascinating lesser Astilbes to your yard. Plant them in medium moist soil among hostas, ferns, and woodland wildflowers. Then next spring, you too can discover new dazzling flowering spikes blooming in your shade garden. **ng**

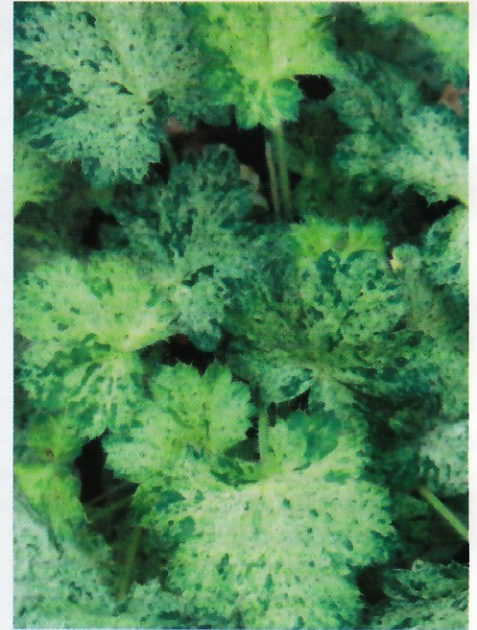
A botanist, Tom Krischan grows tropical houseplants and tends a 1-acre flower garden in Big Bend, Wis.



Heuchera 'Lime Rickey' (PP16,210)



Heuchera 'Palace Purple'



Heuchera 'Snowfire' (PPAF)



Heuchera americana 'Ring Of Fire'



Peltoboykinia watanabei



Heuchera 'Gypsy Dancer' (PP15,959)



xHeucherella 'Chocolate Lace'



Tiarella 'Mint Chocolate' (PP11,379)

To Learn More

Two plant breeders and developers have worked extensively in the area of *Heucheras*, *Tiarellas*, and *Heucherellas*. They offer both plants and information through their Web sites.

Don Heims is a prolific plant breeder/hybridizer, and his company, Terra Nova Nurseries, is a leading horticultural wholesaler. Look for his plants at your local garden retailer. Visit the nursery's Web site, www.terranovanurseries.com, to see what is new. The site has an extensive library of photos of plants.

Tony Avent is a plant explorer. He travels the world looking for interesting new plant species and varieties. His company, Plant Delights Nursery, trials them and determines their suitability for home gardening. His retail catalog, and Tony himself, are cherished by gardeners for their wit and humor.

Get information from Tony Avent through his web site, www.plantdelights.com.

—T.K.



Tiarella wherryi 'Heronswood Mist'



xHeucherella 'Burnished Bronze' (PP12,159)



Astilbe japonica 'Red Sentinal'