

Garden Pyrotechnics



Explosions in the sky (L) and the garden (R).

Fountain grass (*Pennisetum*) 'Fireworks' is a medium-sized, graceful ornamental grass for full sun. The thin leaf blades are variegated with white and green near the base and shades of pink and red along their length. Use this



'Sky Rocket' fountain grass.

tender perennial grass (zones 9-10) as an annual in annual beds, mixed borders, or containers for its dramatic foliage and showy purple, foxtail blooms that appear later in the season.

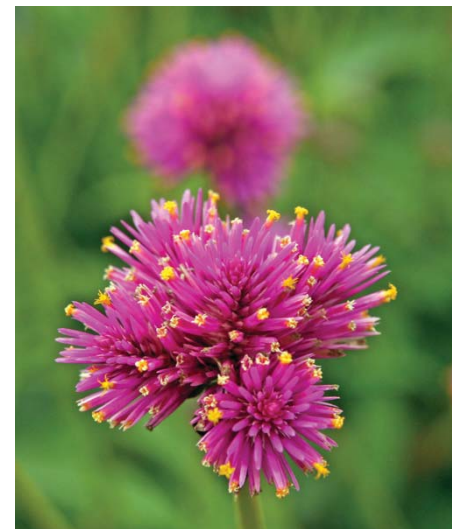
There is another cultivar called 'Cherry Sparkler' that starts out with green and white striped foliage, but as the weather gets warmer they turn a pinkish color with pink-purple blooms. 'Skyrocket' fountain grass is a variegated green and white version with dull purple flower plumes.

Globe amaranth (*Gomphrena* sp.) 'Fireworks' is a large annual plant (2-3 feet or more across) that produces massive numbers of small flowers. The tufts of long-lasting, intense hot iridescent pink flowers tipped with bright yellow are produced on very long stems, making it a showstopper in the garden as well a great addition to a fresh or dried flower arrangements.

There are a number of cultivars of plants that have names invoking Fourth of July celebratory explosives – fireworks, sparklers, and firecrackers. Presumably inspired by the traditional bright, explosive fireworks, plant breeders hope these plants will add some sizzle and excitement to your garden instead of the night sky. Try some of these loud plants if you want to legally own and use some 'Fireworks' without the noise and mess this year – and have them around for more than just a fleeting moment.



The red foliage of 'Fireworks' fountain grass provides an explosion of color in the garden.



The hot pink flowers tipped with bright yellow of *Gomphrena* 'Fireworks' look like tiny explosions.



Yellow sprays of goldenrod 'Fireworks' flowers explode in a backyard garden.

Goldenrod 'Fireworks' is a selection of the North American native *Solidago rugosa* that produces sensational displays of vibrant golden flowers that seem to burst from the plant like skyrockets. This was the top-rated goldenrod cultivar in the Chicago Botanic Garden's perennial plant trials. The slowly expanding clumps grows 3-4 feet tall, with the branching flower stems beginning to radiate out in late summer and explode into color in September.

Hosta 'Fireworks' is a small cultivar, good for edging in moist, shady sites. The narrow, delicately rippled 10 inch long leaves are cream colored with streaky green edging that starts out light green in spring and darkens through the season. This cultivar works well in containers or combined with other miniature hostas in zones 3-8.



Young hosta 'Fireworks'

Some other plants with the cultivar name 'Fireworks' include:

- Clematis 'Fireworks' has showy 6 to 8-inch light purple flowers with a deep pink stripe along the center of each petal. the seed heads of most cultivars also look like a streaming explosion.
- Coneflower (*Echinacea* hybrid) 'Burgundy Fireworks', developed at the Chicago Botanic Garden, is a cross of three species that has purple-red petals rolled into slender quills radiating from the orange cone.
- Crown of Thorns (*Euphorbia milii*) 'Fireworks' has creamy variegated foliage with pink accents and bright red flower bracts. It is a tender plant that needs the same conditions as most cactus plants.
- Dahlia 'Fireworks Mixed' has petals splashed and streaked in a contrasting color. This is easily grown from seed.
- Daylily (*Hemerocallis* sp.) cultivars include 'Fireworks Finale', 'Fireworks Display', 'Pink Fireworks', and 'Summer Fireworks' among others.
- Evening primrose (*Oenothera fruticosa*) 'Fireworks' is a perennial with deep bronze foliage, red stems and red buds opening to canary yellow blooms.
- Garden geranium (*Pelargonium*) FIREWORKS® series includes Bicolor, Cherry, Cherry White, Light Pink, Red-White, Scarlet, and White, all with a "spiky" look to the petals.
- Lantana 'Carolina Fireworks' is a trailing annual/tender perennial with clusters of vibrant red and vivid yellow blooms.
- Pepper 'Fireworks' is an ornamental variety with sprays of cream, purple, red and orange fruits on 16-24 inch tall plants. Other cultivars with related names include 'Explosive Ember', with dark purple fruits and foliage, and 'Firecracker' with small, upright pointed fruits that change from yellow to red.



Clematis seedheads resemble exploding fireworks.



The purple fruits of 'Explosive Ember' ornamental pepper.

- Rex begonia 'Fireworks' is a tender foliage plant grown as a houseplant or shade container plant with silver leaves edged in maroon and a black burst in the center.
- *Rodgersia pinnata* 'Fireworks' is a perennial for shade with a hint of bronze on the large, finely waffled and toothed leaves. It produces dark red flowers on tall stems in early to mid summer.
- Tomato 'Fireworks' is an indeterminate, early, heirloom variety with bright red fruit for slicing.
- *Viburnum dentata* 'Fireworks' is a more compact selection of native arrowwood viburnum. Like the species it has creamy white flower clusters followed by dark blue fruit, and showy red foliage in the fall.



Leaf of rex begonia 'Fireworks'.

In addition to the 'Fireworks' plants, you might want to consider 'Sparkler' or 'Firecracker' plants:

Cleome or spiderflower (*Cleome hassleriana*) 'Sparkler' is a dwarf selection of this common summer-flowering annual. Growing 3½ to 4 feet tall, it offers showy spikes of 4- to 6-inch flowers in hot, sunny locations. Hummingbirds and butterflies visit the spidery blooms, which also make good cut flowers.



Cleome 'Sparkler Blush' flower.

Impatiens (*Impatiens walleriana*) 'Sparkler Rose' is a double pink type that is part of the Fiesta series in a wide range of vivid colors. This annual is best used in shady gardens or containers.

Radish 'Sparkler' is an heirloom variety with globe-shaped roots of deep scarlet tipped with pure white. Its crisp texture is maintained long after maturing.

Other less commonly available "Sparklers" include:

- Coneflower (*Echinacea purpurea*) 'Sparkler' is a selection of this native prairie flower with variegated foliage. It has the rosy-pink flowers with an orange to brown cone typical of the species and blooms from mid-summer through fall.
- Palm sedge (*Carex phyllocephala*) 'Sparkler' is a showy ornamental, clump-forming, evergreen sedge grown for its attractive variegated foliage. Dramatic whorls of grass-like green and white-striped leaves on 1-2 foot tall, cane-like stems create a palm-like effect. It is hardy only in Zones 7-10, but can be grown as an annual (or grown in containers to overwinter in bright but cool indoor locations). 'Spark Plug' is a dwarf version that only gets about 9 inches tall and a foot wide.
- Pepper 'Yellow Sparkler' produces elongated fruit with a blunt tip that mature from green to bright yellow.

A number of different plants have 'Firecracker' as a cultivar name – including a Japanese maple (*Acer palmatum*), caladium, coleus, chrysanthemum, daylilies, roses – and there are a few that are actually called firecracker plant:

- *Cuphea ignea* is also commonly known as cigar plant. Offered as an annual in our area, this perennial in zones 8-10 has bright reddish-



Cuphea ignea grown as a container plant in Wisconsin.

orange tubular flowers that are very attractive to hummingbirds. The 2- to 3-foot tall plants grow best in full sun and moderately moist soil.



- *Russelia equisetiformis*, also called coral plant or coralblow, is a perennial in zones 9-11 that is only occasionally offered as an annual. This multi-branched subshrub has floppy 2- to 4-foot long stems with tiny, scale-like leaves and blooms almost continuously. Striking sprays of tubular, inch-long scarlet red flowers that are very attractive to hummingbirds are borne at the tips of the stems. Some cultivars have creamy-white or light yellow flowers, but those are not nearly as dramatic as the red of the species. It can be grown in containers or in hanging baskets.

Russelia equisetiformis in bloom at the Austin Botanical Garden (L) and rubythroated hummingbird feeding on its flowers.

- *Crossandra infundibuliformis*, also called firecracker flower, is a small tropical shrub with yellow, red, salmon, or orange blooms. The asymmetrical petals spread out into a 3- to 5-lobed fan at the end of inch-long corolla tubes. The plants can be grown as annuals in beds and borders or in containers that can be moved indoors for the winter.



Crossandra infundibuliformis flowers.

And if you'd rather go by appearance rather than name, many of the ornamental alliums have rounded umbels that look like explosions both when in flower and as old, dried inflorescences. You can even spray paint the dried flower heads in metallic tones, bright colors, or pastels to use as decorations to coordinate with any color scheme!



Garden explosions with *Allium* 'Purple Sensation' in flower (L) and the drying inflorescence (LR); *A. christophii* (RC); and *A. cernuum* (R).

The flowers of many types of China aster (*Callistephus chinensis*) and other flowers formerly in the genus *Aster* (most North American species were reclassified in the 1990's into a variety of genera, with many of the more common ornamental ones now known as *Symphotrichum*, for example New England aster, *Aster novae-angliae* is now *Symphotrichum novae-angliae*), have ray petals radiating in a star

shaped pattern reminiscent of fireworks exploding. Many other flowers, such as cactus dahlias, also look like bursting fireworks stopped in time.



China aster, *Callistephus chinensis* (L), *Symphotrichum novae-angliae* (LC), *S. novae-angliae* 'Purple Dome' (RC), and dahlia (R).

Gardeners in more tropical areas (such as South Florida, or those with a conservatory) have many more choices of plants with explosive flower clusters. One great example is *Clerodendrum quadriloculare*, a shrub native to New Guinea and the Philippines, with the common name of starburst bush, firecracker bush, or shooting stars that is common in southern Florida and the Caribbean. Clusters of pink and white flower buds look like a spray of fireworks, then explode with recurving light pink or white petals at the ends of the long tubes.



Flowers of starburst bush, *Clerodendrum quadriloculare*.

Smaller tropical plants with star-shaped inflorescences or growth forms that could be grown as houseplants include many types of bromeliads, especially those in the genera *Guzmania* and *Aechmea*, and many different types of succulents.



Brightly colored bromeliads include an orange *Guzmania* (L), red-centered *Neoregelia*, (C) and pink *Aechmea* (R).

What other plants have you seen or grown that remind you of exploding fireworks?

– Susan Mahr, University of Wisconsin – Madison

Additional Information:

■ *Carex phyllocephala* 'Sparkler' – on the Missouri Botanic Garden's Kemper Center for Home Gardening website at <http://www.missouribotanicalgarden.org/PlantFinder/PlantFinderDetails.aspx?taxonid=256661>

- *Russelia equisetiformis* – on the Floridata website at <http://floridata.com/Plants/Scrophulariaceae/Russelia%20equisetiformis/239>

Just for Fun:

- Cactus flowers: Mother Nature's Fireworks – cool photos of cactus flowers opening on the National Geographic website at <http://proof.nationalgeographic.com/2015/07/03/cactus-flowers-mother-natures-fireworks/>
- Flowerworks: Flowers Arranged and Photographed to Look Like Fireworks – on Colossal at <http://www.thisiscolossal.com/2015/01/flowerworks-sarah-illenberger/>