



Begonias

The begonia group is one of the great groups of cultivated ornamental plants. Very many species have been introduced, and there are numberless hybrids and variations. Because of the great numbers of interesting forms, begonias have appealed strongly to collectors. This is a very diverse group of plants; many of them are grown primarily for foliage, others for the showy bloom. The first begonia was introduced into England in 1777. Since then, they have been improved so rapidly, that there are thousands of variations now in cultivation, displaying the most gorgeous colors in their flowers and beautiful coloring in their leaves.

The geographical distribution of begonias is very disjunctive and localized. They are indigenous to Mexico, Central and South America, Asia and South Africa.

It is extremely difficult to classify begonias into neat, tidy groups. Usually, they're grouped by type of root - bulbous, tuberous, rhizomatous, and fibrous. But this system is not clear cut. Rhizomatous begonias have fibrous roots, for example; a rhizome is not truly a root; many of the tuberous begonias are only partially so.

Over the years, begonia growers have evolved a kind of classification which seems to work well in everyday use. Plants are grouped according to their appearance or growing habit, with a fascinating catchall class for oddities that don't fit anywhere else.

- Rex** Rex Begonias are kings of the Begonia World, that's why they are called REX, which in Latin means KING. These types of begonias display wildly varied leaves streaked, bordered, spotted, and splotched by many colors. They also flower, but usually the flowers are overshadowed by the striking foliage.
- Cane** Cane begonias have been popular plants for many years and were probably grown by your Grandmother who called them "Angel Wing" begonias. There are several types of canes in varying sizes but they all have in common tough stems that have a bamboo appearance, which gives them the cane handle.
- Semperflorens** This type of begonia is probably the most widely grown begonia and in some parts of the country is called "wax type" because of the waxy look to the leaves. All have round leaves and are ever blooming and the flowers come in every shade of red, pink and white.
- Tuberous** The tuberous type of begonia is also very popular around the world as a bedding plant and also as a greenhouse plant. The tuberous types are grown for their flowers although there are a few varieties and species which have interesting leaves and growth.
- Trailing** The trailing type of begonia are grown mostly for their trailing habit but put on a spectacular show of flowers, usually in the spring. Some of the newer varieties have a longer blooming period or are ever blooming.
- Thick-stemmed** The thick-stemmed types are not as widely grown but come in various forms. The common factor between them is their very thick stems. Most thick-stemmed types don't branch much but send up new growth from the base. They also show off the thick stems because they drop their lower leaves and usually only have leaves on the tips. These can be very attractive and are definitely unusual if you're looking for something different to grow.

Begonia Basics

Of the more than 1,000 species of begonias known to man, the tuberous begonias must be considered the most stunning. With up to 8-inch, showy flowers that bloom from summer to fall, tuberous begonias provide non-stop color when planted in containers and beds.

Breeders have created various classes of tuberous begonias, which are distinguished by the flower's form. Flower color ranges from pure white to the deepest crimson. There are even Picotee types that feature contrasting colors on the petal edges. The type you choose to grow is purely a matter of personal taste. The camellia-type tuberous begonias, such as Double Pastel Begonias, feature double, vividly-colored, 6-inch flowers. The plants grow 12 to 15 inches tall and look stunning planted alone in large containers.

Picotee begonias, such as those found in the Picotee Begonia Mix, feature two-tone flowers on 12- to 14-inch-tall plants. They look especially nice when planted with solid-colored, double begonias.

Cascading varieties, such as the scarlet-colored, single-flowered 'Skaugum' and the cream-colored, double-flowered 'Champagne', feature 10- to 12-inch-tall plants that look beautiful planted in baskets hung on decks or patios, or suspended from the branches of a large tree.

Carnation-type begonias, such as those found in the Carnation Begonia Mixture, have 4-inch fringed flowers in colors ranging from white to red. Growing a mere 1 foot tall, this group works well when planted to edge a walk or when combined in small flower beds with other annuals, such as ageratum and dusty miller.

Tuberous begonias are native to high altitudes growing conditions in the Andes Mountains. They perform best when grown in a similar environment with high humidity and cool nights. Tuberous begonias do not grow well in hot, arid environments without special care. Though they need to be shaded from hot sunlight, they do need some sun to flower best. Morning light or light that is filtered through leaves or a lattice roof is best. It may take up to three months from planting the tuber to full bloom, so tubers should be started indoors at least a month before the last frost date. Set tubers 1 inch apart, hollow side up, in shallow pots filled with moistened potting soil in a 70-degree room. Cover each tuber with about an inch of potting soil. Water thoroughly only once to stimulate growth, but do not let the soil dry out completely. Again, a humid environment is best. Once the sprouts are 1 to 2 inches long, re-pot the tubers in 6-inch pots, or their permanent containers. Use a light, moisture-retentive growing mix and cover the tubers with no more than 2 inches of soil. To produce fewer, but larger flowers, pinch off all but a few of the young stems. For a bushier plant, allow all the buds to develop into stems.

After danger of frost has passed, move containers to a partly shaded outdoor location away from any strong winds. If planting in beds, set begonias 8 to 12 inches apart. Plant in a location that gets early-morning or late-afternoon sun. Fertilize regularly. Keep containers moist, but avoid overwatering, which may cause the stems to rot. Begonia foliage should be kept as dry as possible. Overhead watering can lead to powdery mildew disease, so use drip irrigation or self-watering containers. Deadhead plants regularly to reduce the threat of disease. For an exotic effect, snip a flower and float it in a bowl of water indoors.

Tuberous begonias are cold sensitive and will survive outdoors only in frost-free areas of USDA hardiness zones 9 and 10. In most areas, come fall before frost has nipped the plants, remove tubers from containers or beds and let them dry in an airy, shady place indoors. After the tops dry, remove them and store the tubers in dry peat moss in a cool, dark place with temperatures between 35 and 45 degrees F. In late spring, begin the cycle again starting tubers indoors about a month before last frost.





Growing Begonias Indoors by Brad Thompson

This article is to give you info on how to grow begonias indoors and in terrariums. Except for the members that are blessed with a climate where they can grow begonias outdoors year round, most growers have to learn how to grow begonias indoors. Sometimes it's only for the winter months, but for some plants and people it's a year around proposition. Most houses, especially those with forced air heat, are not perfectly suited for growing begonias indoors. Most begonias can be grown in your home, however, if you are careful to provide each with its particular requirements. There are also a few tricks that will help make growing them in the house more successful.

The first consideration is where exactly the begonias going to live. The best light for growing indoors is to use fluorescent lighting. This will give you the most control over the amount of light your plants get. It doesn't have to be an expensive or lavish setup. Even a simple shop light with ordinary cool white tubes will suffice if you want to save money. A more expensive, but possibly more useful idea if you plan to start a larger collection of plants is to purchase a light stand. These can be bought from most mail order catalogs. The lights should run about 14 hours a day, but I have left lights on 24 hours a day and

The plants did fine. The tubes should be just a couple of inches above the tallest plant on the shelf.

Most of us also have natural light that we would like to take advantage of. There are begonias that will grow in nearly every window location except probably not well in a north window. Some plants in terrariums may grow fine in a north window, however. Different areas of the country vary as far as light intensity during the months of the year. You might have to experiment to find which plants grow in which windows. If you find that the plants are stretching, they need more light and if they are stunted and burning then they need to be farther from the window or moved to a window with less light. A good share of begonias will grow in a south window and most will grow in either an eastern or western exposure.

How your plants are potted and what soil mix you use will have a lot to do with how successful you are. Begonias hate to be over-potted or over-watered. It is hard to kill an under-potted begonia, but they can die pretty fast if over-potted. Don't move begonias to a larger pot until roots have filled the current pot. If you find that a certain plant never seems to dry out, it is probably in too large of a pot. Move it down to a size that fits the root ball after you've removed all the soggy wet mix.

For growing indoors you should always use a soil-less mix. Nearly all soil-less mixes are mostly composed of peat moss with additions of perlite and/or vermiculite. You can also make your own by mixing two thirds peat moss or a peat based mix with a third part perlite. A couple of commonly available peat based mixes are Sunshine and Fafard. If you use plain peat moss you should pre moisten it before using because it can sometimes be hard to wet in the first place. When I use peat, I wet it with boiling water to get it slightly damp and then use it after it cools. I wouldn't recommend using any amendments you would commonly use outdoors such as leaf mold or manure, or even garden soil. These will cause your mix to stay too wet indoors and also invite diseases. A peat mix is the perfect mix for indoors since it drains well, but holds the perfect amount of moisture for the plant without staying too wet. I would use the same mix for begonias in terrariums.

As far as watering goes, a good pot for using indoors is the type called a self-watering pot. There are many brands and they work well for most begonias. You should also only use a peat-based mix for these types of pots; anything else will stay too wet. Allow the mix to dry out slightly before refilling the reservoir again.

Regardless of what you have read in indoor gardening books, there are few plants that want to stay constantly moist. Besides, constantly moist is near impossible to achieve. Allow the surface of the mix to dry out slightly and then water thoroughly till water runs out the bottom when using conventional pots. Don't use saucers unless you fill them with pebbles so that the plant doesn't sit in water. You can use bottom watering, but empty the water out of the saucer after a couple of hours. Most begonias will also grow well using wick watering such as is used for African violets and gesneriads.

Humidity is the biggest problem with growing begonias indoors. Although begonias don't like to be in wet soil, they do like humidity in the air. You can achieve enough humidity for many types of begonias by simply misting them daily. You can also use a humidifier. If you are growing plants under fluorescent lights a simple way to keep good humidity is to cover the plant stand with a plastic tent (make sure to use nonflammable plastic). They will still usually benefit from misting inside the tent because if the light fixtures are inside the tent they tend to keep it warmer and the air will dry out faster.

There are many begonias that are easier to maintain and that you will have greater success with if they are grown in terrariums. It's possible that your past attempts with terrariums have soured you on them, but if you follow a few simple rules you should do well with them. Most people keep their terrariums too wet and this is the most common reason for failure. You should only use a sterile medium for growing and this should only be damp.

The two most common mediums are the peat mix listed above or plain green sphagnum moss (don't use the brown florist type sphagnum). If you use peat moss, first put in a layer of perlite or pebbles in the bottom covered by a thin layer of mix. This will allow any extra water a place to drain. If you use sphagnum, wet it first with hot water and squeeze out the extra water before using. Peat and sphagnum are already basically sterile and if you take the added precaution to wet with boiling water before use, it will be even more so. There will always be some glass fogging after planting, but if it's excessive, crack the lid open until it has dried out enough that you can close tightly. Terrariums require less light than plants in pots and should never get direct sun. They should also not be fertilized often. Since the soil in a terrarium never gets flushed, the salts will build up and damage the plant.

All plants that are actively growing do best with regular fertilizing. There are many brands of fertilizer formulated so you can fertilize every time you water by adding a few drops to the watering can. You can also just mix your own weak fertilizer such as quarter strength and use once a week.

Begonias grown indoors can be pinched or pruned any time of the year. Any plants you bring indoors from outside will probably adjust easier if you trim them back. This will also give you cuttings to start a back up plant in case your plant doesn't do well with the change of conditions.

Indoor plants in nice warm conditions are very prone to mealy bugs. The easiest and least toxic mealy bug killer is plain rubbing alcohol. You can brush the mealy bugs with a cue tip or artist brush dipped in the alcohol and they die on contact. For a badly infested plant you can also put the alcohol in a spray bottle and spray the entire plant. It won't harm the plant. Avoid spraying the soil directly as a precaution.

