

HOME GROUNDS FACT SHEET

CORNELL

Cooperative Extension
Nassau County



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Begonias

Begonias come from a large and varied family of plants that are often described as ideal houseplants. Unfortunately, the begonias you are likely to encounter in the average nursery are usually the least interesting or least adaptable members of the whole family. Why this situation has evolved is hard to understand.

In most nurseries and garden centers you will probably find *semperflorens* begonia, Rex begonias, Rieger begonias and Tuberous begonias. "Semps" (*semperflorens*) which do well outdoors in the summertime, are annuals, and are tired by fall and make a poor showing on winter windowsills. Rex begonias, which have stunning shimmering silver, red and green leaves, are temperamental on windowsills and usually succumb to attacks of mildew and various diseases.

The ancestors of the Tuberous begonias hail from the high slopes of the Andes mountains and demand a cool climate, or at least a 15 to 20 degree drop in temperature at night in summer, which is not easy for many of us to provide.

The begonias that do well in the home are the cane-like begonias, the shrub-like begonias, and especially the rhizomatous begonia. The best part is that, out of a family of approximately 2000 members, the vast majority belongs to these amenable categories.

If you have the slightest tendency to collect plants, you will never run out of new and different begonias to try. There are begonias with leaves shaped like the maple tree, the elm, cabbage, starfish, spiral snail shell, palm, fern, pond lily, and grape, to name just a few. Their texture ranges from satin, chenille, velvet, seersucker, to patent leather and practically every texture in between. They can be speckled or streaked or splashed with contrasting colors.

Once you have seen a color catalog from a begonia specialty nursery you will be hooked. But why should begonia specialists have all the fun? Ask your nursery to order some interesting begonias of the rhizomatous, cane-like and shrub-like types and see if you don't want to widen your windowsills to make room for more and more.

Cane-like begonias are so described because their stems are elongated and have prominent nodes like bamboo canes. Their leaves are the familiar angel-wing type or cut to resemble maple leaves. Their leaves may have sprinklings of large or small polka-dots or streaks of silver on them. Cane-like begonias have huge bunches of flowers that are extremely decorative and may even have an elusive sweet, spicy scent on sunny mornings. They love going outside for the summer and will grow fast and blossom gloriously in a sheltered spot that gets morning or afternoon sun, but protection in the heat of the day.

If the plants get too large to bring back inside in the fall, steel yourself and cut the whole plant down to 2 to 4 inches or so and start them over. They will rest, practically dry, but not bone dry, until early spring when you can bring them back into the light and start watering them regularly again.

Shrub-like begonias are so called because their stems branch readily into full rounded, usually floriferous shrubs. One that is often sold at garden centers in the spring for hanging baskets is called Begonia 'Richmondensis' and there is a newer one called Begonia 'Dragon Wings.' But these just scratch the surface of this branch of the begonia family. These plants are so satisfying and easy that they are usually recommended for beginners as a confidence-booster. Grow them just as you would a cane-like begonia. Cut them back and start them over if they take up too much room or if they get lopsided.



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Building Strong and Vibrant New York Communities

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Rhizomatous begonias

have thick, gnarled, often snaky rhizomes which may creep along the surface of the soil or reach out over the edge of the pot.



Leaves grow on the upper side of the rhizome and the roots grow down into the potting mix. They thrive in shallow azalea pots in standard houseplant mix or half perlite and half peat moss.

The rhizome is actually a storage organ for the plant, which means that it can take a little less frequent watering than the cane-like or shrub-like begonias. Rhizomatous begonias have their flowering season in the early spring and they need – no, **must have** – long uninterrupted nights for a few weeks in the winter for them to set buds. That means they should be set in a room that gets little or no light after dark in the evening. The result will be an astonishing swoosh of fragrant pink or white flowers on long stems held above the foliage in a bouquet effect. However, even if you never see your rhizomatous begonias bloom, they are well worth growing for their foliage alone. There are rhizomatous begonias with leaves a foot-and-half wide and slashed into sections like a palm tree. Others are tiny and curled like baby snails. Some are pleated, fluted, puckered and dimpled.

There are endless variations of colors including reds from oxblood and maroon to wine, and greens running from chartreuse to Kelly to hunter, often splattered with dots and patterns of browns and velvet black.

BEGONIA CULTURE

Most begonias do well in a standard packaged houseplant mix or a mix of half peat moss and perlite. For best results, repot in fresh mix every year, or at least every two years.

Light – begonias like a lot of light, short of full sun. They like much more sun than African violets, for instance. These are perfect plants for light gardens, choosing the smaller varieties. The fluorescent light brings out the intriguing colors and patterns of the leaves to perfection.

Temperature – begonias should ideally be grown at about 70 to 75 degrees during the day and about 65 degrees at night. There is wide leeway in acceptable temperatures as long as they are kept rather more shaded in the heat of the summer, and kept on the dry side if temperatures go below 55 degrees at night in the winter.

Water and Fertilizer – begonias will do well if they are kept moist in the summertime, and will respond eagerly to fertilizer applied at a weak rate at every watering in the growing season. In the winter, when they slow down, they should be allowed to dry out a little between waterings and receive very little fertilizer until new growth starts in spring.

Propagation

Stem cuttings – make a cutting with two or three nodes, root it in perlite or sphagnum moss and keep moist and humid until roots appear.

Seeds – are extremely tiny and demand patience.

Leaf cuttings – rhizomatous and Rex begonias can be propagated from wedge-shaped slices of the leaves, placed narrow end down in a mix of peat moss and perlite with a plastic bag over the cutting. Be patient. It may take three months or longer, but a sturdy clump of new plants will be the reward. Cane-like and shrub-like begonias cannot be propagated by leaf cuttings.

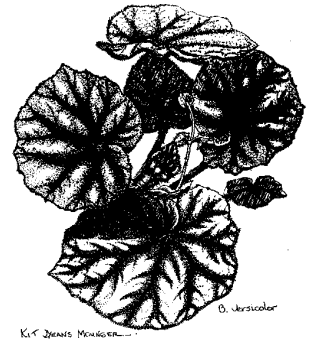
PROBLEMS

Powdery mildew is probably the worst pest of begonias. Plenty of fresh, moving air (it may be a good idea to run a small fan near your begonias in the wintertime), and making sure to water early in the day so that no water remains on the leaves overnight, are probably the best preventative measure. Be sure to pick off and dispose of any mildewy or dead leaves and spent flowers so that other rots do not have a place to get started.

Insects find begonias less appetizing than most other plants. If you find insects on your begonias, be sure to check the other plants in the area. They are more than likely the source of the problem.

SOURCES

If you find yourself getting interested in begonias, you will get valuable information, pictures of beautiful begonias, and sources of plants from The American Begonia Society, 157 Monument, Rio Dell CA 95562-1617.



In addition, the following nurseries are good plant sources:

Glasshouse Works

Church St.
Stewart OH 45778-0097

Logee's Greenhouses

141 North St.
Danielson CT 06239

Kartuz Greenhouse

1408 Sunset Drive
Vista CA 92085-0790

Lyndon Lyon Greenhouses

14 Mitchler St.
Dolgeville NY 13329

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