

GET GROWING

Bring on the begonias

Why let them fall victim to frost? Bring them in, pot them up, and keep them blooming 'til spring

By LEE GUGLIADA

There is probably no other plant family that offers the variety available from Begonias. The name "Begonia" is derived from Michel Begon, a French botanist.

Botanists have classified over a thousand distinct species; when you add hybrids to the list, the number of plants in the world of Begonias defies counting. Many different types of Begonias are prized by expert gardeners for the outstanding foliage variations and variety of different types of blossoms.

The different groups of begonias have different cultural requirements, but most species come from tropical regions and therefore, they and their hybrids require warm temperatures. Most are forest understory plants and require bright shade. In general, begonias require a well-drained growing medium that is neither constantly wet, nor allowed to dry out completely.



STATEN ISLAND ADVANCE PHOTOS/FRANK J. JOHNS

Many types of begonias will start from leaf cuttings. All parts of the leaf are capable of rooting and forming a new plant. The only requirement is that the leaf portion contains a main vein.



The leaves of cane-stemmed begonias often are shaped like angel wings.

WAX BEGONIAS

You may have grown the *semperflorens* or "wax" begonias as bedding plants outdoors over the summer. Since these are annuals, they usually are left in the garden to be killed by the first frost of the season. But, if you hate to let them just die off, they can be potted up and brought indoors for winter color and replanting back in the garden next spring.

Did you know that there is a begonia that is hardy in our area, which is a true perennial. Begonia 'grandis' is a tuberous, gently spreading and upright perennial, which reaches 24 inches in height. It bears pink blooms from late summer into fall and prefers light shade.

Tuberous begonias grow from tubers and range in shape from those with short, upright stems and large saucer-size flowers to the hanging basket types with multiple trailing stems covered with flowers.

Most tuberous begonias produce spectacular flowers in summer and autumn. They usually have a dormant period, during which the tubers can be stored in a cool and dry place and replanted in spring.

At the end of the flowering season, stop watering and cut off the shoots, or wait until the first frost kills off the foliage. Lift tubers from the soil and store in dry peat moss.

HOUSEPLANTS

As far as flowering houseplant begonias are concerned, the cane-stemmed begonias are among the easiest to grow. Their tall, bamboo-like stems may require staking, since, when not pruned they may reach 10 feet in height. It is a good idea to cut back overly long stems in the spring or early summer to encourage new growth at the base.

Showy, hanging clusters of red, pink or white flowers open in spring and summer, and some cane-stemmed be-

gonias flower all year long. These have handsome foliage, as well as attractive flowers. Most leaf surfaces are glossy, but some have a dull surface. The leaves often are shaped like angel wings.

Flowering houseplant begonias should be located in a bright spot and receive some direct sunlight. Early morning sun in an east window works well. Several hours of winter sun are beneficial.

Keep soil evenly moist, allowing it to dry only slightly between waterings. Reduce water in winter and avoid waterlogged soil.

When the plant is in full growth in spring and summer, fertilize with a balanced liquid fertilizer at half-strength at alternate waterings. Never allow plants to sit in a saucer of water.

LEGGY PLANTS

Begonias tend to be leggy. Pinch the tip of branches to promote lateral growth. When your plant seems well shaped, stop pinching to allow the plant to flower.

Many begonias are grown primarily for their decorative foliage, although some of these foliage types may also have nice flowers. Most foliage begonias grow from thick rhizomes that grow along, or just beneath the soil surface.

Foliage begonias flower in midwinter to late spring. Flowers may be hidden in the foliage, be just above it, or on long stems above the foliage.

Foliage begonias should be located in a bright spot away from direct sunlight. Keep soil evenly moist, allowing it to dry only slightly between waterings. Reduce water in winter. Temperature at night should not drop below 55 degrees. Repot in spring.

MULTIPLY PLANTS

If your rhizomatous begonia seems to be crawling out of its pot you can rejuvenate it and multiply your plant collection as well. Cut the rhizome so that the original plant remains centered in the pot. Take the rhizome that you cut off and divide into 2-inch sections, laying the cuttings horizontally on the soil. Most rhizomes can be rooted directly into your potting mix without any special considerations. The rhizome is fleshy and can easily maintain itself until roots and leaves form. Make sure the rhizome makes good contact with the soil, but is not buried more than half way.

When using the tip of a rhizome, remove the largest leaves. (They will probably fall off during rooting anyway.) Tip cuttings from rhizomes can be rooted upright with the cut end stuck one-half-inch into the rooting medium.

LEAF CUTTINGS

Many types of begonias will start from leaf cuttings. All parts of the leaf are capable of rooting and forming a new plant. The only requirement is that the leaf portion contains a main vein.

The most commonly used medium for leaf cuttings is perlite. It is already sterile and holds the correct moisture without staying too wet. The only disadvantage is you have to check often to make sure that it doesn't dry out. Any medium such as peat moss, vermiculite or a combination will work fine as long as they are sterile and moist.

The best leaf cuttings are young leaves, but any leaf will work, even damaged leaves you have to remove anyway. If the leaf is small, you can just cut the stem and insert it into the rooting medium. Larger or damaged leaves should be cut down by rounding off the edges and leaving the stem.

Put the rooting medium in a small pot, put the cutting in the pot and then put the pot into a zip lock bag. Check the leaf cutting regularly to make sure it doesn't dry out. As soon as little plantlets have come up, cut an opening in the zip lock bag. When they are large enough to handle, pot up your begonias individually into small pots, keeping them covered with the plastic bag until they adjust.

Lee Gugliada is a member of the Great Kills Garden Club, which is a member of First District Federated Garden Clubs of New York State.