

TUBEROUS BEGONIA

Several wild begonia species native to the Andes in South America were hybridized over a century ago to produce flowers of every color except blue. They thrive outdoors where summer conditions produce a cool, humid season. Flowers normally appear in groups of three — one large male flower (up to 6") in between two smaller females (2"). Multiflora types produce many stalks, leaves and flowers and are the simplest to raise; grandiflora grow taller with more brittle stems that require staking. Hanging begonias seem to be more difficult. Bulb size determines the number of flowers that will be produced. For display pots, choose 1½ -2" bulbs to plant in 10-12" pots; plants will be 15-20" with 5-8 blooms. Smaller bulbs are best for mass bloom in a garden bed or an 8" pot (10" plant with 4 blooms).

Bulbs should be started in early March in flats deep enough to allow planting medium to cover the bulb one-half inch, as most of the roots grow from the top rather than the base of the bulb. Position the bulb hollow side up in a starting medium of half peat moss and half sand. A half-gallon milk carton with one side removed provides an appropriate starter flat. Keep bulbs moist, but not soggy, to prevent rot. Preferred temperature is 65-70°F. You may choose to rub off all but one shoot to produce a single stalk with larger leaves and flowers.

As soon as the bulb develops two leaves the same size, it is ready for potting. Begonias require very rich, loose, friable soil such as a standard potting soil with additional humus (3:1) or peat moss with perlite added. Fish meal or bone meal should be mixed into potting soil. Carefully set bulb surface at same level (adding more soil on top may rot the stem.) Settle soil by gently thumping pot rather than firming soil by hand. Stake now if plant will have a single stalk. (If stem is snapped off before flowering, allow it to grow again to nourish the bulb. If you store it without allowing regrowth, the bulb will not last through winter storage). If plant is placed in outdoor bed, remember the dart-shaped leaves point in the direction the flower will face; place bulbs 16-18" apart and stake these plants as soon as they become top-heavy with blossoms.

Now it is important to give the young plant enough light for strong growth with cool temperatures (55-60°F) at night. Spring sunlight and artificial lights are both fine. Rotate the pot every two or three days if the light source is a window. In the summer, mature plants prefer light shade with brief sun and humidity of at least 50% and good air circulation. Too much sun may cause leaf burn and bud drop; overwatering may also cause bud drop. If leaves curl under, the plant is overfed; if they look pale, they need a booster shot of fertilizer. For larger blooms and sturdier plants, feed weekly with a fertilizer high in phosphate and potash after flower buds appear and show color. This will also yield bulbs that are harder and more likely to survive winter storage. Foliar feeding is also beneficial.

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Within a week after the first light frost touches the begonias and turns the leaves yellow, lift the bulbs and let them dry. Do not remove stems immediately. After about six weeks the leaves and stems will have withered enough to be removed without injuring the bulb. When potted plants have finished flowering, gradually reduce water until foliage has thoroughly withered and soil is quite dry. Shake off the surplus soil, dust with an insecticide-fungicide and store in dry peat moss, sand or vermiculite at 55°F.

Tuberous begonias may be started by seed in January and will blossom the first summer. Fill one inch of planter with soil mix of equal parts damp leaf mold and coarse sand, sifted through one-half inch mesh. Add ½" of damp mix sifted through one-eighth inch mesh. Sprinkle dust-like seeds on surface and do not cover. Slip into plastic bag and place in a spot where the temperature is 65-70°F. Seeds germinate in a week or two, then you can open bag to allow air circulation. The proper amount of moisture is crucial to avoid damping-off fungus. If necessary, moisten with a fine mist of water. Maintain feeding schedule described above to develop healthy bulbs for winter storage.

Large tubers can be divided immediately after buds sprout by cutting with a sharp knife, leaving a bud on each piece. Dust cut surfaces with sulfur or charcoal and let them dry for a day or two. Replant in coarse sand until new growth is 1-2 inches, then transfer divisions to regular soil mix. They will blossom the first summer.

You can also propagate by cutting some of the stems when they are 3 or 4 inches, removing them flush with the bulb surface. Dip the end in rooting hormone and insert it 1" deep in moist, coarse sand. Slip the whole pot into a plastic bag and keep it in bright, indirect light at about 65°F. These cuttings will be large enough to blossom in the summer.