



GLOXINIA

In 1845, a Scottish gardener named John Fyfe made a discovery among his gloxinia seedlings. Instead of the normal nodding slipper-shaped flowers, one seedling had symmetrical bell-shaped blossoms that were held erect. All of today's varieties of gloxinias, with their large ruffled edges and vivid velvety petals of purple, blue, pink, red, or white, are descendants of that single chance seedling. Today's hybrids are bred for strength and often flower at intervals during most of the year. Some almost never go dormant. Others may rest for several months.

Tubers can be started whenever they are available (usually December to March) and will produce a potted plant for the house or shaded patio. Related to African violets, gloxinias need the same growing conditions when they are blooming. Because the large leaves cover the soil, the surface dries out slowly and can encourage rot. Apply water around the base of the plant or from below. Don't water on top of the leaves.

Handle gloxinia carefully, as the leaves are brittle and break easily. When starting a large tuber, place in a 5 to 6-inch pot, preferably a shallow bulb pan with one inch of gravel in the bottom. Fill the pot halfway with a soil mix of equal parts of loam, sand, and peat moss; or a soil mix of equal parts all-purpose potting soil and peat moss. Place the tuber, cupped side up, in the pot and cover with ½ inch of soil. Leave ½ inch of pot rim exposed. Moisten soil thoroughly and let it drain. Keep it in a warm (60°F minimum) but shaded spot and protect from drafts. Keep soil slightly moist.

When leaves begin to form, move the plant to a warm, sunny windowsill or under fluorescent lights. Increase humidity by putting the pot on top of (not in) a layer of gravel in a tray as large as the mature leaf spread. Keep watering with tepid water so the soil feels moist but not soggy. Feed with houseplant fertilizer every two weeks. If the stems begin to grow long, or the leaves curl under on the edges, or if the plant gets spindly, the light may be too dim. Move to a brighter location. If the air is too dry the buds may drop and the plant won't flower freely. You may need to enclose the plant in a tent of plastic to raise the humidity, at least until flowering begins.

When the last flower has faded, cut off the old stems and leaves. Look for signs of new growth from the tuber. If you see the new leaves, continue watering and fertilizing and repeat the complete process as long as new sprouts are produced. Fifty-year-old plants are not unknown. If there is no new growth, water the plant a little less each time until the soil is nearly dry. Store the tuber in the pot at 50-60°F in dim light. Check resting tubers frequently and water enough to keep them plump. When small new leaves appear in 2-4 months, repot in fresh African violet soil and start over. If roots have filled the container, plant into larger pot. Expect blooms in about 4 months.

Cooperating Agencies: Washington State University, U.S. Department of Agriculture, and Spokane County.

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