

All About Begonias

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Grow beautiful plants in your home and garden

Begonias are one of the largest species in the world and grow in their native habitat between 15 degrees north and 15 degrees south of the equator. They need temperatures between 66-75 degrees and are found in Mexico, Central and South America and parts of Africa. Although the discovery of begonias is obscure and in regional dispute, the name can be documented as honoring Michel Bégon, an avid plant collector in the late 1600s.

Begonias can be divided into 3 categories:

- Tuberous, which are grown for their large showy flowers
- Fibrous, which develop small flowers with waxy foliage in hues of bronze or green
- Rhizomatous, which are known for spectacular multi-colored leaves with numerous patterns, sizes and designs



A hardy begonia at Christianson's Nursery in Mount Vernon. Photo by Christine Farrow / Skagit County Master Gardeners

From these three distinctions, hybridizers have bred over 1200 named species to withstand full sun and drought in addition to shade and high humidity.

Tuberous begonias bloom from summer to fall. Lift them from pots in mid- to late October. Give them a place to dry for a few days, and then store for winter in a frost free container. Look for signs of growth—small pink nubs emerging from the tuber—in late January/early February. Gardeners wanting an early start can pot them by positioning the tuber at a slight angle, covering it only partially with soil and placing the pot in full sun indoors. As more growth appears, add more soil, taking care to water only around the bulb to avoid rot. In the growing season, do not let these plants dry out. Take care to support their delicate stems as they break off easily.

Begonia sutherlandii grows from tubers and forms little tubers in the leaf arils with profuse orange flowers all summer. It is

borderline hardy here, not fond of our rainy winters, so put the pot in a cool greenhouse or unheated garage or basement and keep watering to a minimum. New growth appears in late April/early May.

Begonia grandis is the hardiest begonia here in Skagit County. It has branching red stems, carrying large smooth coppery green leaves with red undersides, and dies back to the ground every winter. It loves shade and mixes well with hostas and ferns. Small fragrant pink flowers appear in late summer. The only challenge is to remember where it is planted as it emerges from dormancy in mid- to late June.

Trailing or climbing begonias are tender perennials that like full sun and very little fertilizer. Their tubers are not lifted for winter storage, preferring to stay in their pot in a frost free place for winter with little water. In spring when shoots emerge, place them in a south-facing window or bright room. Rotate the pot every day or so as they will reach for the light.

Bonfire begonias from which most hybridizing began back in the 1800s are examples of a trailing begonia. If grown from a cutting, it will form a thumb-size tuber by winter when it goes dormant.



Left: Rex begonia. Above: Trailing begonia. Photos by Christine Farrow / Skagit County Master Gardeners

Other varieties of begonias make excellent choices for house plants, including the **cane begonia**, a tall and woody plant with prominent bamboo-like joints. Some varieties are ever blooming, like part sun and no wind. “Angel Wing” is one of the better known cane begonias. **Hiemalis begonias**, also known as **Reiger begonias**, are bushy, compact, profuse bloomers and need plenty of light in winter. Cutting them to a 4" stub when they get leggy will reward you with another show of bloom. **Rex begonias** are the showiest of the begonias with multi-colored leaves, needing high humidity, bright filtered light and temperatures from 55-85 degrees. They are propagated through cuttings as they do not flower.

For the summer outdoors here in Skagit County, you can't miss with *Begonia semperflorens*, or wax begonias, that like cool summers and full sun. **Shrub-like begonias** are tolerant of sun and wind and reach 18"-30" in height. Fuchsia begonias are good examples of shrub-like begonias with flower colors ranging from pale to dark pink and shades of oranges. They can be overwintered as a house plant and, with plenty of winter sun, will continue blooming.

These are just a few of the wide varieties of begonias from which the Skagit home gardener can choose. Whatever you decide on, you will find them delightful and rewarding to grow.

RESOURCES

- *Sunset Western Gardener*, Sunset Publishing Corporation, 2001; www.sunsetbooks.com
- *A to Z Encyclopedia of Garden Plants*, DK Publishing, Inc, 1997
- *Begonias*, Brian Langdon, Cassell, Artillery House, 1989