



STARTING AND GROWING TUBEROUS BEGONIAS

Huge, colourful blooms and long, reusable life of the tubers, make these Begonias a popular winter windowsill project.

STARTING TUBERS

Start tubers indoors in February or March, six weeks before the last frost in the Spring. Line a shallow container or pot with loose, fibrous material. Coarse sphagnum moss is excellent, but peat moss will do. The medium must be very porous but also have high moisture-retention characteristics.

Place tubers, concave side up, a few inches apart and cover them with about half an inch of starting medium. Since the roots grow from the top surface of the tubers as well as from the bottom, exposing the top will lead to a poorly developed root system. Room temperature is fine, but avoid higher temperatures. In a greenhouse, bottom heat should be provided until growth is well under way.

Keep the medium uniformly moist but not soggy. If in doubt about watering, keep the soil a little on the dry side until there are visible signs of growth - usually within two weeks - at which time watering may be increased slightly.

Keep begonias in a sunny window. They need direct sun, not north light or filtered light. Allow only one shoot to develop from each stem. If multiple shoots appear from a single tuber, snip off all except one. Do not pour water directly over the crown of the tubers, especially where sprouts have been removed, and avoid wetting the leaves or stems.

During the month of April, put the tray or pots outdoors whenever the temperature rises above 50 degrees F., in a spot where they will receive a few hours of sunlight. Check them more frequently for water needs when they are outdoors, because drying occurs more rapidly outside in the wind and sun.

PLANTING

The bed where begonias will grow should be dug to a depth of 10 inches. If the soil is poor, it should be entirely discarded and the bed filled with a mixture consisting of two parts good soil, one part composted manure, three parts peat moss and bone meal at the rate of one cup per two square feet of bed. The soil should be gently packed into the dug-out area, thoroughly soaked and allowed to settle, after which it should be left slightly higher than the surrounding ground to prevent the trapping of water.

After the danger of frost is gone, plant the begonias not less than fifteen inches apart. Closer spacing will result in poor air circulation and cramped growing conditions - an excellent breeding ground for decay. Disturb the roots as little as possible as you remove the tubers from the flat. Plant them, with a mass of the starting medium clinging to the roots, approximately one inch lower than they had been growing in the flat (or pot). Water thoroughly immediately after planting.

CARE AND FERTILIZING

Do not feed the begonias until they stage their first strong burst of bloom. From then on, a light watering with liquid fertilizer every two weeks should keep them blooming the rest of the summer. Avoid wetting the leaves or stems when feeding. During active growth, keep the bed moist but never soggy. Water in the morning if possible, once again avoiding wetting the foliage, stems or blooms, which should be dry during the night.

If an old leaf yellows and begins to turn brown, cut it off near the joint of the leaf and the petiole (the leaf stem), not at or near the main stem. The petiole will then fall off naturally. An open wound on or near the main stem encourages decay. Remember to go through the bed regularly to clean out fallen leaves, petals or other organic debris. If plants need staking, care must be taken not to injure the tubers when inserting the stake. Use ties that will not chafe or constrict the fleshy stem.

LOCATION

The tuberous begonia should be grown in moist, fibrous soil that has been enriched with bone meal, and it should be given light shade with some early or late sun. Its roots should be spared from competition with other plants and its top should be clean, dry, and exposed to free circulation of air. If these conditions are met and the begonias are blessed with cool weather (temperatures not much above 80 degrees F.), you may expect magnificent results.

STORING TUBERS

After the plants are nipped by frost, lift them out of the bed with a ball of earth and set them in an area sheltered from rain, but still out-of-doors. A good method is to place them in an empty bushel basket and cover them with another, inverted basket. Store where the basket will be at least partly protected from rain. Allow to dry; apply no water.

A week later remove all dead parts that come off easily. Do not force off any stems or roots that are still fleshy. Wash off the tubers and allow them to dry thoroughly indoors, each tuber individually exposed to the air. They should come to resemble the condition they were in when started in the Spring. A few clinging, dry roots won't matter. Place the dry tubers in two or three thicknesses of paper bag and store them all winter in a cool, dry spot. An unheated corner of the basement is perfect, provided that the temperature remains above freezing. Keep the bag off the floor.

Next Spring you will be ready to start all over again. Tubers last indefinitely, keep more easily than most roots and bulbs that are stored for winter, and gradually increase in size if they have been growing well from year to year.

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