

IMPATIENS - NEW GUINEA

Since the New Guinea hybrids appeared on the market, impatiens have moved into the limelight. According to a recent survey, impatiens are now this country's most popular bedding plants, a title they stole from petunias, which have been losing ground ever since. Why this sustained increase in popularity? These new impatiens possess qualities that go beyond simple novelty. With the addition of the New Guinea hybrids, impatiens overcame their reputation for disheveled appearance. These are tidy plants. No need to waste time brushing spent petals from the bottom leaves: the petals of New Guinea hybrids fall clear of the leaves entirely.

LOCATION

Adaptability is another quality that set these hybrids apart from their predecessors. They prefer shelter from the hot rays of the mid-afternoon summer sun, but if you respect that preference they need no further coddling. Sun causes their growth to be somewhat more compact but all the more colorful, although partial shade seems to suit them nearly as well. A drought may result in wilting, but supplemental irrigation provides a remedy.

DISPLAY

Because their range of colors is broad, these hybrids fit well into nearly any bedding display. The colors are clear and uncompromising – the reds are bright and electric, failing to blend with each other or the equally vivid pinks of other New Guinea hybrids. For this reason it is usually safest to feature a single color in a display, or to contrast it with a white flowering hybrid. The many cultivars that have bright markings on their leaves are less apt to be profuse or showy bloomers than those with non-variegated foliage. Here mixing might meet with more pleasing results. Although impatiens are traditionally bedding plants outdoors, they might also be employed in other capacities around the yard. New Guinea impatiens can attain a height of two feet and an equal breadth. Laden with blossoms, a single plant can serve well as a focal point. It should be surrounded by such low-growing neighbors as alyssum and lobelia, which complement each other but do not compete for attention.

OVERWINTERING INDOORS

The New Guinea hybrids have changed the image of impatiens indoor as well as outdoors. Their appeal as houseplants, however, may be economic as well as aesthetic: because the New Guinea hybrids cost as much as typical perennials, gardeners are determined to make them last for more than one season. Thus we find impatiens spending their summers luxuriating in the backyard sun, then in fall being marched inside. The New Guinea hybrids will not withstand a frost – a fact that cannot be stressed too strongly!

TEMPERATURE & HUMIDITY

Once safely indoors, impatiens prefer nighttime temperatures between 55 to 60 degrees Fahrenheit, and are happiest when daytime temperatures remain a moderate 70 to 75 degrees, though they will not tolerate deviations from these ideal conditions. Lack of humidity causes these plants no noticeable stress, but they dry out more rapidly than do most houseplants.

LIGHT

Indoors a southern exposure is ideal for the New Guinea hybrids, but they can usually survive with less light, you may have to forfeit the normally compact growth habit or settle for somewhat fewer flowers.

FERTILIZING

Fertilize the plants every month during spring and summer, until October. A balanced feed, such as 20-20-20, should be applied full-strength if used monthly, or quarter strength in weekly doses.

If your New Guinea impatiens fail to blossom, it may be because you are paying them too much attention. The tendency is to report a plant when its roots fill its container, but doing so often inhibits flowering. Too much nitrogen will stimulate lush leaf growth but also prevent flowering. Too little light or too high a temperature may produce similar results.

GROWTH HABIT & PRUNING

One characteristic that places the New Guinea hybrids a step ahead of the crowd is their tendency for self-branching when grown in pots. This natural tendency should be encouraged by periodic pruning to achieve uniformly shaped mound. Because impatiens are ever blooming, they can be pruned in any season, although they must be pruned more often in the low light of winter. Cut the plant right back to the base and do not fret if your specimen looks butchered; it will grow out and resume blossoming in a miraculously short period of time.