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BACK TO BEGONIAS

A new generation of interesting selections brings the plant
back to prominence

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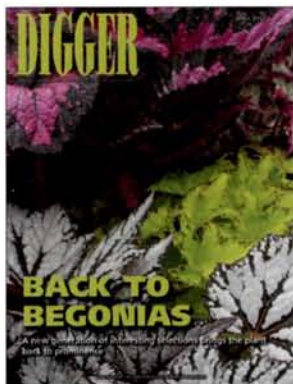
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Cover: Some begonias are known more for flowering and others, more for foliage. The Shadow King™ line belongs in the latter category, including (top to bottom) Rothiko, Green Envy and Moonlight. All three are new introductions for 2012 by PlantSmith in Scotts Mills, Ore. For more on begonias, see the article starting on Page 24. Photo by Curt Kipp. **This Page:** Another Shadow King™ selection grown at PlantSmith is Strawberry Lime. Photo by Curt Kipp.



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Back to begonias

A new generation of interesting selections brings the plant back to prominence

The Iron Cross rex begonia (*Begonia masoniana*) features prickly-looking foliage and a distinctive cross shape at the center of each leaf.



'Golden Picotee' is a tuberous, trailing begonia with gorgeous blooms that radiate from a golden center to hot pink edges.

By Elizabeth Petersen

By the time Dan Heims left college in the 1970s, he had collected almost 300 begonias. Begonias were favored as houseplants then, and many "flower children" nurtured rex and angel-wing begonias on windowsills.

Times changed, and the botanical clock swung away from begonias for a while. But now, begonias are back.

Heims and other breeders have selected and rolled out a new generation of begonias with exotic, almost psychedelic foliage or bushels of brilliant flowers for shade gardens, patio containers and hanging baskets. Many perform as windowsill plants, and some take sun, too.

"Begonias are back in the mainstream as garden, container and houseplants," Heims said.

Wide world of begonias

It is easy to be confused about begonias, since the diverse genus *Begonia* includes some 1,500 species — and loads of crosses — worldwide.

Grown from tubers, rhizomes or seeds, the looks are as varied as the native reaches, and breeders have been mixing and matching in efforts to improve the habits and ease of care for both grower and gardener.

Heims' breeding program at Terra Nova Nurseries in Canby, Ore. has produced tropical begonias that have flashy foliage, tougher constitutions



Bonfire begonias are bred by Tesselaar Plants and sold in several colors, including the original orange. Yoshitomi Bros. Inc., a nursery in West Linn, Ore. is among the growers selling this trailing variety.

and wider uses.

Ball Horticultural has been instrumental in bringing out new begonia varieties. Retail Business Manager Bill Calkins said, "The demand for colorful options for less sunny locations is definitely on the rise. Begonias offer an impact of color and texture for landscapes."

Ball breeds for plants with unique flowers, striking foliage, low maintenance needs and versatility, Calkins said. "New introductions fit the ways gardeners are designing now. You can find begonias for baskets, specimens, large landscape fillers, containers or standard bedding."

For fabulous foliage

Foliage begonias are back.

Ball views the trend as "begonia-mania," said Katie Rotella of Ball



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Marketing Communications. Ball believes that the new varieties will “wow” gardeners and designers.

Gryphon (*Begonia* × *hybrida*), a Fantastic Foliage™ selection from Ball breeding company PanAmerican Seed, “helped begonias get back into the mainstream,” Heims said. “It is a gateway plant that opened consumers’ eyes to the benefits of begonias.”

Suggested as a “thriller” to create a bold accent in a mixed container, Gryphon provides both color and texture, Rotella said. It also boasts drought tolerance, vigor and size.

“We’ve had great feedback. Gryphon is very low-maintenance and economical. Just a small input can grow very large in one season,” Rotella said. Gryphon is also appropriate for indoor applications, including malls

and lobbies.

In Oregon, Tanasacres Nursery is growing Gryphon this year.

The new introductions from Terra Nova Nursery resemble rex begonias, but are stronger and more versatile, Heims said. They fit right into a current gardening trend that blurs the line between indoors and outdoors.

There have also been inroads in hardiness. Both ‘Metallic Mist’ and ‘Silver Splendor’ from TNN are hardy in the Pacific Northwest, and more new varieties are coming.

Rex begonia breeder Gary Crook of PlantSmith in Scotts Mills, Ore. focuses on getting begonias to finish quickly, grow easily and perform well in the Pacific Northwest. Selections must be “stronger, prettier, and easier to grow.”

Older rex begonias need rather

warm greenhouse conditions and low light, but Crook’s varieties grow at 62 F day and night. “You can save 30 percent on the heating bill,” he said.

Crook starts plants from leaf wedges, which produce roots in four weeks, shoots in six weeks and are ready to transplant from 72-cell size in fourteen weeks.

Although rex begonias make great houseplants, “the biggest market is outdoors,” Crook said. “There aren’t a lot of plants that will flourish in full shade.”

Demand for Crook’s liners is good, 50 percent higher than last year.

PlantSmith offers several crosses named for Oregon cities, and others have been launched by GreenFuse Botanicals, including the Shadow King™ series.

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It isn't hard to get growers to talk about plants. The tough part is getting them to narrow down their list of favorites to just a handful. Here are some of the varieties our sources recommended:

Ann Detweiler
Fry Road Nursery
Albany, Ore.



Barkos hiemalis begonia (*Begonia 'Barkos'*) — This flowering begonia has such deep, dark red blooms that they practically glow. A picture can't do it justice. The growth habit is compact, but vigorous, making it ideal for a 6-inch pot or a basket. It can be used as a summer annual or as a floral house plant.



Heart-of-Jesus fuchsoides begonia (*Begonia fuchsoides 'Red' or 'Pink'*) — This shrubby begonia comes in pink or red, flowers year round, and can be used indoors or out. It is quick to finish and bloom.

Growing to about 1–2 feet high, it easily can be shaped to keep it bushy.



***Begonia x tuberhybrida* 'Illumination® Golden Picotee'** — 'Golden Picotee' marks the return of the earlier *B. x t.* 'Show Angels' bicolor-type trailing tuberous begonias. It is much, much brighter than its predecessor, *B. x t.* 'Illumination® Peaches 'n Cream'. It's easy to care for, with season-long, self-cleaning blooms. It looks arresting when paired in a basket with *B. x t.* 'Nonstop® Fire'.



Iron cross rex begonia (*Begonia masoniana*) — This begonia boasts surreally puckered, variegated leaves that beg to be touched even though they look almost thorny. The plant looks better and better over

time, producing lots of leaves from the crown without becoming rangy and heading off in one direction. It is a striking accent for a dish garden or tropical container garden, and can be used as a house plant or a summer annual. Reaches 1 foot tall.

Dan Heims
Terra Nova Nurseries
Canby, Ore.



Begonia 'Benitochiba' — Self-branching and shrubby, this plant defies classification, having the appeal of a Rex, but the shape and toughness of a shrub-type begonia. This begonia has very cool, rose-metallic leaves

in a palmate arrangement. It blooms with pink flowers in the fall and winter. 'Benitochiba' works well as a houseplant and as a patio plant. It tolerates cooler temperatures than rex begonias. When used outside, it needs shade and good drainage. Reaches 24 inches tall and 18 inches wide.



Begonia 'Curly Fireflush' — Dramatic spiraled leaves highlight this hybrid begonia. Accenting the spiral is a red-haired edge and center contrasting nicely with the deep green

leaves. 'Curly Fireflush' keeps its foliage all winter and blooms with pearl white flowers, which turn pink in the fall and winter. It enjoys humidity. This begonia is ideal for use as a houseplant, in mixed containers, or in summer borders in east exposure part sun. It reaches 18 inches tall and 24 inches wide.



Begonia 'Fireworks' — Deep metallic, paisley purple bands encircle an iridescent silver-white center that is undeniably striking. Great pink flowers add to the appeal. This plant did especially well in our display

gardens in amended garden soil. It is not as picky as a rex, and shows great vigor. Upright habit. Reaches 18 inches tall.



Begonia 'Metallic Mist' — 'Metallic Mist' displays heavily silvered, maple-like leaves on a Zone 7 hardy begonia. It vigorously grows to form a striking 16-inch tall specimen. Pink flowers in late summer extend the show.

It won an American Begonia Society Distinctive Hybrid Award in 2008.

Jon Venzke
F & B Farms and Nursery
Woodburn, Ore.



Rieger begonia (*Begonia x hiemalis*) — Rieger Begonias are a great plant for potted indoor sales. The fully double flowers bloom a long time providing good shelf life and hold up well in the home. They prefer

a warm shaded area for production. They are long day or stress responsive to set blooms. There is one series that is sun tolerant, Solenia. The Solenia have gained popularity in the home landscape or container gardens.



Panorama begonias (*Begonia x tuberhybrida*) —

Panorama begonias are a tuberous begonia suitable for hanging baskets and containers. Panoramas have a cascading habit and are easier to ship than the pendulous type. With 3-inch blooms and uniform habit, they make quite a show. They reach 9–10 inches in height.



***Begonia x benariensis* 'Big Begonia'** — This is a large landscape begonia. With a height of 24 inches or better and 2–3-inch blooms, these are truly big begonias.

They are quick to grow for the grower and provide summer long beauty in the landscape. These are sun loving beauties. The only downside is there are only three colors: red with green leaves, red with bronze leaves and rose with bronze leaves.

New Shadow King additions for 2012 include 'Rothko,' the most striking of the series with rich, red and black rounded leaves; 'Moonlight,' with silver/white foliage that shines brightly in shaded areas; and, 'Green Envy,' with unique leaf shape and bright chartreuse color. All are PPAF.

Ann Detweiler of Fry Road Nursery in Albany, Ore. said sales of rex-type begonias have been steady. "I often incorporate rex in mixed dish gardens or shady patio containers as a way to get customers hooked on the benefits of color from foliage instead of color from flowers."

She likes the Great American Cities™ series and the "eternally intriguing" Iron Cross (*B. masoniana*, native to China).

Flower power

Flowering begonias are back too.

Jon Venzke, grower for F&B Farms and Nursery in Woodburn, Ore. has worked with begonias for decades. Tuberous begonias, long popular for hanging baskets, are long-day plants. This can create problems for growers, he said.

To minimize the risk of plants shutting down and trying to produce tubers, Venzke recommended starting from larger cells and planting later in the season.

F&B currently produces Nonstop® and Nonstop Mocca® for larger plants; Venzke purchases them in 72-cell size.

Both series boast fully double, four-inch flowers and Mocca selections have rich, chocolate-colored foliage.

F&B is adding the tuberous Panorama™ from Benary to its basket program this year. Plants have a somewhat pendulous habit and loads of 3-inch blooms, so they make a nice full basket, Venzke said.

At Fry Road Nursery, tuberous begonias have always sold well, Detweiler said. "They have good impulse appeal throughout the summer and good staying power for custom-



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▲ BACK TO BEGONIAS

ers over the entire season. They make a more indestructible hanging basket since they just keep pumping out blooms. They don't collapse immediately if allowed to dry out and are largely self-cleaning," she said.

Detweiler also likes the Mocca series. "The dark foliage makes the flower color pop. Plants are a little tighter in habit than Nonstop," she said.

Trailing begonias

Some exciting begonia options come in the form of trailing *B. boliviensis*. The sun-tolerant, tuberous species has angelwing foliage and exotic, bright, fuchsia-like flowers on arching stems. Plants can weather some drought.

Yoshitomi Brothers, a wholesale grower in West Linn, Ore. is promoting the Bonfire® series, introduced by Tesselaar Plants and available from Selecta, and the Million Kisses® series from Ball Horticultural.

"There has been a tremendous amount of breeding with the *boliviensis* types," said Yoshitomi production manager Dan Bamberger. "We have increased production greatly, since there is much bigger demand for premium begonias and they make great baskets."

"The Bonfire series has been a shot in the arm for the industry over the last ten years," Heims said. Plants root well, come into bloom quickly and boast masses of flowers for large pots and baskets from late spring to late fall. Neat, spreading plants are undemanding and produce drama in full sun or part shade.

"*B. boliviensis* has been a growing market for breeders and liner producers," Venzke said. Several Bonfire selections are available, including the original Orange and Scarlet, both with semi-trailing habits and green foliage, and Choc Pink and Choc Red, both with more mounding habits and luscious chocolate foliage.

Million Kisses begonias boast good branching and many early, large flowers. Plants flower ten to fourteen days

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faster than the competition, so growers can start later and reduce bench time.

Coming this spring are 'Amour,' said to be the most vigorous variety yet, with deep red flowers and dark foliage and 'Santa Cruz sunset,' an adaptable selection that can take heat, humidity and direct sun. Both are Ball Seed exclusive selections, available as unrooted cuttings or rooted liners.

The new Sherbet Bon Bon from Ball is more upright than Million Kisses and produces double yellow flowers. Bamberger predicts it will be popular.

Options for large-scale landscapes

Wax or fibrous begonias (*B. semperflorens*), grown from seed, provide commercial landscapers "a lot of bang for the buck," Bamberger said. They take full sun to part shade and hold up

well in the landscape. The downside for growers is that they are slow.

"It's a shame wax begonias are considered a cheap annual, because growing them is a lengthy process, up to six months from seed to finished plants. They should be worth more," Bamberger said.

Jon Venzke of F&B Farms concurs. "Wax begonias are tough and resilient, handling most anything the summer brings, but they are slower to size up for a grower than most annuals."

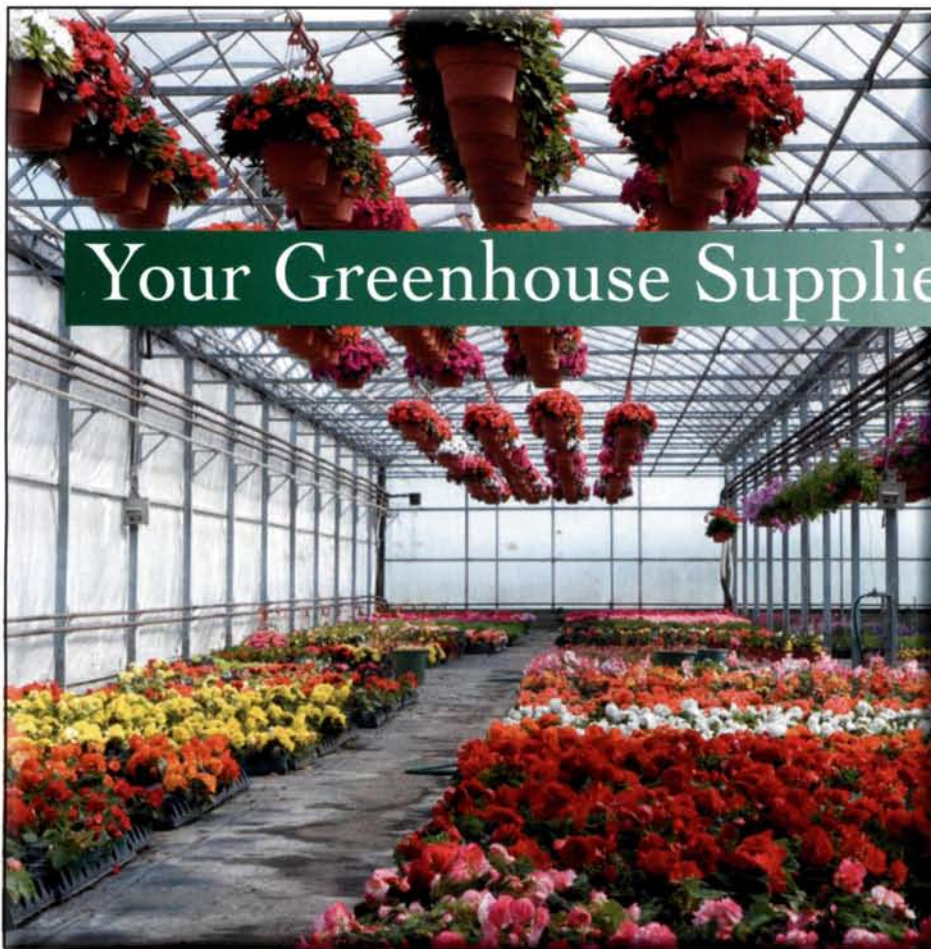
Venzke said he has "played with purchasing a larger plug tray such as a 128 or 144 cell, and the timing works much better. However, for most plug producers this would be a custom order. We now simply acknowledge that they take longer to produce and commit the space for the extra time."

Demand has been on the rise in recent years, Venzke said, probably due to increased variety and "great improvements in fibrous begonia breeding in the last ten years." Plants are larger and quicker. Varieties like the BIG® series from Benary® come in both bronze and green leaf.

"They will not hold in a smaller 4-inch pot and have a shorter sales window, but they do make nice gallon pots," Venzke said. New intermediate size varieties such as Benary's 'Party Scarlet' may help growers time the crop with other annuals.

Big™ begonias (*B. × benariensis*) claim the best vigor and branching of the landscape begonias. Large, three-inch flowers produce a show from early spring to late fall. Plants, which adapt

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to many climates and soils, can take sun or shade and are two weeks earlier than competing varieties.

Ball Horticultural contributed the Whopper series, big, vigorous landscape plants with excellent heat tolerance. Whopper Red with bronze leaf is a new variety with a lower, rounded habit.

Dragon Wing™, a new full, arching angelwing begonia from PanAmerican/Ball, produces big blooms and tolerates heat, humidity and cool conditions in baskets, containers and landscapes. Easy to grow from pelleted seed, crop time from seeding to sale is 16 weeks for a 10-in basket.

Improved selections

Rieger or Hiemalis begonias have been used as houseplants since the '80s, but newer, improved varieties have spurred increased use in the landscape, Venzke said.


Although most are shade-loving basket types, some, such as Solenia from Oglevee, finish faster, resist mildew, take full sun and produce a long season of bloom in a range of colors.

Detweiler likes Solenia begonias, too. "They provide much more concentrated flower power over the top of the plant like a fibrous but with the big, double form of a tuberous," she said. "The Solenias we've tried have performed really well: nice, even habit and blooms that don't go brown over the top when spent." ☺

Elizabeth Petersen writes for gardeners and garden businesses, coaches students and writers, and tends a one-acre garden in West Linn, Ore. She can be reached at gardenwrite@comcast.net.

Notes: The largest collection of begonias in the U.S. is the Begonia Species Bank at the Fort Worth Botanic Garden.

Terra Nova begonias are not currently available from the nursery, but the patented selections are available from other labs and growers.




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