

# Landscaping with Begonias

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Using Begonias in the landscape has come a long way. For many years Semperflorens have been used in the garden, because they are very bushy plants with erect succulent stems, glossy leaves and are continuously in bloom. Another advantage of Semperflorens is they range in color from white to dark red, blooms can be single or double and the foliage can be bronze, green or variegated. For many gardeners and landscapers in tropical and sub-tropical areas the palate of begonias used in the garden has been widened to include Cane-like, Shrub-like, Rhizomatous, some Trailing/Scandents, Rexes and some Species. Houston and surrounding areas (especially south of Houston) are considered to be sub-tropical. Generally our winters are mild with no severe freezes that freeze our soil. Plants may be damaged but rarely killed. Yes! Our summers are very, very hot as a rule, but when planted correctly and maintained Begonias in the Houston garden are unbeatable especially when mixed with standards such as ferns, caladiums, impatiens and aroids. Bromeliads can even be used to give an even more exciting tropical look to the garden.

Incorporating begonias into the garden is fun and easy as long as you remember location, location, location and preparation. Begonias in the landscape like nice bright filtered light and protection from the hot burning afternoon and early evening sun. Morning sun is a begonia's absolute favorite. Begonia choices for adding to the garden are only limited to your imagination. To add begonias to your garden the first thing to consider is the location. As stated above it should be a brightly light area under the protection of large trees or shrubs to protect them from the hot afternoon and early evening sun. Filtered light under large trees is perfect. Also you need good air circulation. With the location(s) chosen you now need to do some soil preparation. Unless you prepared your existing planting areas yourself the former homeowners and especially the builders most likely did little to no soil preparation. Yes you can just dig a hole and put a begonia into it. Our soil here in the Houston area is so very bad it will not flourish. You need to amend the soil so it is loose and drains nicely. To achieve this you can add some peat moss or soil conditioner, a touch of horticultural lime, some composted cow manure and if you like a couple bags of Rose Soil or Top Soil they both contain a small amount of sand, which helps drainage even more. Soil Conditioner is bark mulch that has been refined or ground even finer and is labeled Soil Conditioner and not bark mulch Turn soil with garden fork or garden spade. Do this for each of the locations you wish to plant with begonias or any other plants for that matter.

Once you have amended your soil you are ready to plant your begonias. The one thing you need to remember is plant for the future. The container size plants you are planting 4 inch, 6 inch, gallons or hanging basket will determine the distance between each plant. Remember they are going to grow and if they are planted too closely they will crowd each other out especially the smaller plants. If you are mixing different types of begonias remember the taller ones such as the cane-like need to be planted near the back. Shrubs generally grow smaller. If rhizomatous are being mixed in be aware of the size of the mature plant it may overpower a shrub-like. After

planting you should mulch the newly planted begonias. Bark mulch can be purchased at your local nursery and used to mulch your bed. You can also use grass clippings. What is very nice is to use are grass clippings mixed with the leaves falling from your trees in the fall and winter. Oak tree leaves chopped up by a lawn mower are excellent and don't cost you anything.

Now that you have chosen your location, prepared the soil and planted your begonia selections you need to water them in. It is important to water them in. You can use plain water, but it is recommended you water them in with Root Stimulator/Starter Solution, Hasta Gro, fish emulsion, sea weed or a weak solution of your favorite fertilizer such as Peters 20-20-20, 20-10-20, or Super Bloom (recommended strength).

To have happy healthy plants it is recommended that you feed your begonias in the garden with your favorite fertilizer be it chemical or organic at least once a month at full recommended strength. Every 2 weeks is most ideal. An extra benefit to your begonias would be to foliar feed them as well. You can foliar feed with Hasta Gro, fish emulsion (add a teaspoon or two of vanilla per gallon to eliminate the odor), sea weed or Spray and Gro. Most commercial fertilizers can be used as a foliar spray but check the manufacturer's directions to be sure and to get proper dilution rates.

Here are some plants that have been grown in Houston and surrounding area gardens with success:

#### **Cane-Like:**

B. coccinea pink (hort), B. 'Irene Nuss', B. 'Kentwood', B. 'Silvermist', B. 'Symphony', B. 'Pink Shasta', B. 'Phantom' B. 'Ester Albertine', B. 'Winning Way', B. Bonanza', B. 'Jumbo Jet', B. 'Ross Swisher', B. 'Nokomis, B. 'Marguerite DeCola' B. 'Hannah Serr', B. 'Sophie Cecile', B. 'Ecanto Bronze', B. 'Pink Jade', B. 'Pinafore Sport, B. 'Tom Ment', B. 'Hazel's Front Porch', B. 'Dainty Spray', B. 'Lucerna', B. 'Rhapsody' and B. 'Orange Rubra'

#### **Shrub-like:**

B. 'Dancing Girl', B. echinosepala, B. fisheri, B. 'Perfectiflora', B. 'Jean Pernet'. B. 'Medora', B. 'Concord', b. 'Argenta-guttata', B. 'Selover' and B. 'Lois Burke'. B. 'Panasoffkee' and B. 'Withlacoochee' are indeed shrubs but can be used as ground covers

#### **Rhizomatous:**

B. 'Joe Hayden', B. 'Erythrophylla', B. 'Green Velvet', B. 'Black Velve', B. 'Kit Kat', B. 'Edge of Sunset'. B. 'Passing Storm', B. 'Mustang', B. 'Sir Percy', B. 'Leopon', B. nelumbiiifolia, B. popenoei, B 'Palomar Prince', B. heraclifolia (several variations are in cultivation), B. 'Aquamarine', B. 'Ethel Bee', B. 'Plumb Georgous', B. Earl-E-Bee, B. 'Cachuma', ( B. imperialis , B. 'Silver Jewel', B. 'Silver Emblem' make great ground covers when planted among rocks under the extra protection of shrubs). B. 'Manus' also makes a very

good ground cover. Most of the Brad Thompson Hybrids that are not jointed at or below the soil do very well such as his snake series.

### **Rex Cultorum**

B. 'Lalomie', B. 'Helen Teupel', B. 'Merry Christmas', B. 'Black Magic'. There are a lot of new cultivars that have been hybridized to withstand our heat and humidity. These are usually available at our annual fund raiser. Also there are a lot of Rex cultivars available in places like Home Depot and a lot of garden centers that are not named. Keep your Rex Cultivars cool and moist plus well fed and they will give you a lot of enjoyment throughout the spring, summer and fall. Mulch well to protect the rhizome during the winter.

### **Species and Thick Stems**

A lot of the species such as U-062, U-177, B. hatacoa 'Silver' and thick stems such as B. 'Virginia Jens' and B. seraconeura can be grown in the garden but must be dug up before a freeze or left as an annual as they do not like temperatures down in the 30's and if frosted will not return from the roots.

All the above plants listed are plants that have been grown in the garden by members of our group. As it was stated in the beginning there are a lot of plants out there and you are limited only by your imagination as to what plants you choose to add to your garden. May we ask that you keep a list of what you plant and let us know how they do and if it is not listed above let us know if it returns from perhaps being frosted next winter.

**HAPPY GROWING!!!**

Tom Keepin 2/2005