

Shipping Cuttings and Plants

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One of the great pleasures of growing begonias is in the sharing. We all like gifts, and one way to get something, is to give something. Why else do we call it a "gift exchange" in our branch programs? The Astros Branch over the past years has been especially generous, sharing numerous boxes of cuttings and plants with other branches across the nation. However, at a recent sharing session, I realized that many of our members did not understand the best methods for preparing plants and cuttings for shipping even though we had discussed it several times in the past. The most common mistake made was to include water in the plastic bag with the cuttings before closing. This was either actual loose water or more likely, a wet paper or cloth towel. This is a certain path to destruction because cuttings will rot within a day or two at the latest. Another very common mistake was cuttings that were either much too small, or even too large to ship. Neither works.

To correct these obvious mistakes I will lay out the techniques that I have found most successful for plant shipment over the last few years.

Cuttings

What: Cuttings of cane-like, shrub-like, thick-stem, and trailing/scandent begonias should be about six inches long or should include about five nodes. Cuttings from plants with long internodes may only include about three nodes. Tip cuttings are best, but middle stem cuttings also will root and give satisfactory plants. Cuttings of rhizomatous begonias, including *Rex cultorum*, should be either individual adult leaves, or rhizomes with one small leaf at the growing tip.

Timing: Cuttings can be taken almost any time of the year with spring the first choice and fall the second. Mid-summer and mid-winter will work, but requires more care and attention. How many: to make a satisfactory four inch pot, it takes about four cuttings of a cane etc. Less than this will be slow to develop and will rarely look good for some time.

Bagging

Place all of the cuttings in either a quart plastic bag if the cuttings are small, or a one-gallon bag for more normal sized plant parts. The bag is then mostly closed with the "zip-lock" seal, then blown up by mouth, like a balloon to make it fairly tight. One's breath supplies all the humidity that the cuttings need to survive. Do not add water nor work with wet cuttings. Water will cause the cuttings to rot very rapidly.

Rooted Plants

Try to send small plants, say about 6 inches around or tall, usually contained in a 2 ½ to 3 inch pot. Plants in 4 inch pots are satisfactory, but the smaller ones weigh less and travel well. Remove the rooted plant from its small pot and put the root ball with all of the clinging potting medium into a small “sandwich” plastic bag. Then put a wire “tie” around the root ball such that the medium is fairly tightly contained and will not escape. Finally, put the total plant, included the bagged root ball into a one-gallon plastic bag and seal it as noted above. This procedure gives a plant that will ship well and will remain alive for a long time.

Commercially, plants are often shipped after containing the root ball and pot with paper wrapping and tape. The plant and its root ball is then wrapped in newspaper to maintain its shape and to act as insulation. I have successfully used this method too, but am partial to plastic bags.

Boxing

Storage boxes from Office Depot are good to ship in. Typically these are 10 x 12 x 14 inches in size. These boxes are strong and fairly cheap, costing about \$1.25 each. To pack the box, put the rooted plants in first, roots in the bottom. Then fill in around and over these bags with the inflated bags of cuttings. A typical box will contain about 12 to 15 bags total, and will be very tightly filled so that none of the bags slip around. Then put on the lid and secure it with numerous pieces of packing tape.

Shipping

There are two key considerations regarding shipping. The first is time of year. You should restrict shipping to those spring and fall months when temperatures at both the shipping point and the receiving point are moderate, say 50 to 80 degrees F. For Texas this means March, April, May, October and November. This is also good times of year for the plants to root after arriving. The second consideration is how the shipment is made. I suggest sending plants by US Priority mail. From Houston, a box can travel to any place in the continental US in two to four days. Try to ship on Mondays so that the box will arrive on Wednesday or Thursday. For short trips, less than 1000 miles, you can also ship on Tuesday because the box will arrive by Friday, latest. The whole objective is to not have the box lay around the post office over the weekend when temperatures may be less controlled . A typical box costs between \$7.00 and \$9.00 to ship.

Overall this procedure will ship a box of cuttings or small plants almost anywhere in the US for a cost of about \$10.00 to \$12.00, including cost of the box and the bags. Further, the plants and cuttings will arrive in good shape and can quickly be potted.