

rick's weed-read

the pack trials

COMPANION COVERAGE

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BEGONIA

BASKET OPTIONS

from the Pack Trials 2002

Despite their attractive presentation and higher price point, few growers have tapped this market. These are some of the author's favorite varieties.

**By Rick Schoellhorn,
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This was my first trip to the California Pack Trials, and it was a really wonderful experience. The term "trials" is a bit of a misnomer, though, as there was very little comparison trialing and a lot of display material. I understand that, in the past, trialing was more the norm, but as the focus shifted to sales, the emphasis on trialing dropped off. Don't let that dissuade you from going to the Pack Trials, though, as it is still the best way to see what is new and in the works for the crops you grow. As an example, having just written an article on Angelonia, I found that most of the major companies have new Angelonia series coming out this year, and there are some marked differences between the different series. I'm looking forward to trialing these and seeing what the differences are (look for an article update on Angelonia in the near future).

Everywhere we went, we were given educational tours and a ton of great production information. If you have a new grower on your staff, this would be a really good opportunity to collect an impressive grower's notebook all in one week. Coming from the university system, I want to give Kudos to American Takii who had a great series of displays showing the different plant growth regulators at different rates on their crops; it was a really informative set-up.

I have a lot more sympathy for garden writers after attending Pack Trials. There is simply too much material to hold it all in your head, and still so many incredible plants coming out that you feel an obligation to do them all justice. It is really a great time to be in this field as our nation's breeders and production nurseries are able to churn out new material much faster than they could in the past. As a result, there are a lot of really exciting new plant introductions on the way for 2003.

In the next two articles, I will cover a couple of areas I feel are especially promising. Begonia basket options, which have always been a personal favorite of mine, is this month, and in the next issue, some of the new and very different materials released by a variety of breeders for use as component plants or stand-alone material.

Why begonia basket options? As we move into a retail market that is always looking for instant gardens, this group of plants provides a huge selection of varieties for both Northern and Southern growers.

COOL-SEASON TUBEROUS-TYPE BEGONIAS

Northern nurseries rely on strong tuberous-type begonias for early spring sales, and there were some extremely nice options at Pack Trials this year. Most of these plants are not new for 2003, but many of them have new colors or forms available. Since the tuberous begonias are a very difficult crop in the Deep South (there's a good niche market for someone), it was great to see them again and to be reminded of their value in the Northern and Western markets. Although the non-stop types are proven performers, I'm going to focus mostly on the hanging (or pendula) forms and less on the uprights. With the pendula

Culture Quickie:

Fibrous Begonias

Fertilization. 150 ppm liquid feed or low level of slow release are adequate.

Watering. Normal irrigation is fine. Allow plants to dry slightly between waterings

Media. All commercial peat lite medias work fine, pH 5.8-6.5, treat the same as you would bedding begonias.

Temperatures. Fibrous begonias are more tolerant of heat so production temperatures of 65° F night and up to 85° F day will work. Cooler temperatures slow growth but give a more luxuriant plant.

Light. Bright light is essential, though most growers should avoid full sun until plants are hardened.

Propagation. Seed production is the general rule, but some are propagated by cuttings and sold as rooted liners.

Crop timing. In general, 5-6 weeks from plug to finished 4-inch, hanging baskets (3-5 plugs per basket) approximately 10-12 weeks.

Flowering. Fairly constant flowering in normal production; photoperiod is not really an issue.



types, growers will want to ship material in bud and let the plants grow out in a retail setting because once plants get very far over the side of a hanging basket, they become very difficult to ship. Easily bruised and somewhat fragile, they are best in localized markets and will sell well once the buds show color.

There were quite a few major displays of hanging tuberous-type begonias that I saw as I drove through California. Most of the begonia series below have similar production requirements, and the limiting factor on who can grow them appears to be growing temperatures. All prefer daytime temperatures around 70-80° F and night temperatures somewhere around 55-60° F. These begonias are best in early spring production, as summer temperatures can be very hard on them, but in the extreme north, they do beautifully all through the summer.

Lorelei (Gro-Link). Lorelei are available as rooted cuttings in 72-cell trays. The flowers are 2-3 inches in diameter and a brilliant, clear orange with a cactus form flower (see picture and culture information on page 108). The individual petals are serrated and quite straight, giving each bloom a

rounded look. Lots of color and a very graceful habit. The plant is fairly open, unlike some of the other basket types, and leaves are a lighter green. Average crop times: 14-15 weeks for an 8- to 10-inch basket (three plants per basket); seven weeks for a 4-inch (one plant per container). ▶



Illumination Apricot

Culture Quickie: *Cool-Season Begonias*

Fertilization. 150 ppm liquid feed or low level of slow release are adequate. When using slow release, monitor crop and check for good nutrient balance, especially during early phases of production when growth is most rapid. Many growers apply a soluble micronutrient mix during the first three weeks of growth.

Fungicides. A preventative, broad-spectrum fungicide is a good idea.

Watering. Normal production irrigation is fine; allow plants to dry slightly between waterings.

Media. All commercial peat lite medias work fine, pH 5.8-6.5. These begonias are sensitive to over-watering, so avoid heavy mixes with poor air exchange.

Temperatures. Cool conditions are best. Maintain night temperatures at 55-60° F, and keep daytime temps below 80° F.

Light. 1,500-3,500 foot candles. Avoid full sun; overly bright light will cause scorching and stunting.

Propagation. Both by cuttings and from seed; however, seed germination and seedling care are fairly specialized — plugs save time and effort.

Crop timing. In general, seven weeks from plug to finished 6-inch, hanging baskets (3 cuttings per basket) approximately 15 weeks.

Flowering. Best under long days, not a fall crop.



'Dragon Wing'

Tenella Series (S&G Flowers). This series is in many ways similar to Lorelei, but the flowers have fewer larger petals and smooth edges, giving the plant a different, softer look. Colors include pink, white, orange and rose; white and pink have pale green foliage; orange and rose forms have a dark green leaf. Otherwise,

habit and production for this series are similar to Lorelei. Makes a nice-looking, 6-inch plant but would also do well in baskets. Average crop times: From seed to first flower is roughly 16 weeks; production timing is similar to Lorelei.

Illumination Series (Benary Seed). Illumination series is a full,

Camellia-type flower on a cascading plant and is larger in stature and habit than the previous two series. This series is also available in the Proven Selections line. These plants were displayed in 10-inch baskets and were a mass of color. Leaves and flowers are larger; stems are thicker; and all around, this is a big-



'Solenia Peach'

ger plant than Lorelei or the Tenella series. So plan accordingly.

Fortune Series (Dæhnfeldt). This series is much more upright with fully double flowers, so production will be similar to nonstop series. These are camellia-flowered types with blooms up to 4-5 inches in diameter. Strong, vigorous plants make excellent 10-inch baskets but no hanging stems, just full bushy plants. This actually works well because the flowers are presented either horizontally or upright, making it good for displays. The series is not new, but they added an orange this year.

Solenia series (Oglevee). The Reiger-type begonias are a little bit different in their production than some of the other types we have looked at. If you are not familiar with their production, I suggest checking with your distributor before purchasing the plants and making sure you know what you are doing as they are a bit tricky, but well worth the trouble. Flowers are 2+ inches in diameter, fully double with some single flowers mixed in and a bit more heat-tolerant than the true tuberous types. Incredible, iridescent colors are more upright in growth habit and a great way to get into something that will set your crops apart from mainstream flowering plants.

ALL-SEASON FIBROUS BEGONIAS

Fibrous begonias in general are produced as plugs; some growers may still do in-house production by seed, but due to the size and expense of the seed, most nurseries opt to have them produced by plug specialists. In this way, they take less bench space and time to get to sale.

The selections I will be talking about each had some attribute that

made them different from generic bedding begonias, but all will do well being grown under the same conditions as their generic counterparts. Like the typical bedding begonia, these crops are easy to grow, and consumers like them because they require little additional care after purchase to keep flowering and putting on a good show of color all summer.

Lotto Series (Benary Seed). The major difference between these begonias and standard bedding types is flower size. Many of the series have single flowers up to one inch or larger, with a nice habit and strong growth. Green foliage will bronze up in brighter light. The pink stood out in my mind as being exceptionally strong, but this series all looked good, and the increased flower size was really a plus.

Maribel Light Pink (S&G Flowers). This begonia is one of the old-fashioned *Begonia richmondensis* types and is not at all like the generic bedding begonia, though just as attractive and easily produced. This is a very striking plant with glossy olive green to black foliage, pale pink blossoms and a plant size of 10-18 inches in height. The leaves are somewhat like an angelwing begonia but with a bit of serration on the edge and a little bit of fuzziness to the leaf surface. This is a sleeper of a plant and deserves much more exposure.

Dragonwing (Pan American Seed). If you aren't growing this begonia, you should be. This is one of the most attractive begonias on the market; it gives an incredible show with minimal effort, and season-long interest in part sun to full shade. Pan American had it in their displays in 20-inch baskets, and the plants were four feet across! It is marketable in 4-inch pots as specimens, and in bright light, the foliage will bronze, which sets off the red or pink flowers. A truly exceptional plant!

Queen Begonia Series (Dæhnfeldt). I have always thought the double sempervirens begonia market was undersold. The flowers of these plants resemble miniature peonies, and the plants are tough. What set this series apart from others was the size of the leaf; some of the leaves were up to seven inches across, and the baskets were eye-catching. Some of the doubles have prob-

lems in the extreme heat of the Deep South, but these will still be great spring and early summer baskets nationwide.

Doublet series (Oglevee). Another double-flowered form but with smaller leaves and incredible flowering. The foliage is almost invisible under the masses of flow-

ers. This type of Begonia can be used for winter color as the *Begonia sempervirens* types will tolerate a light frost and continue flowering. I've seen this series in production, and it is really a strong crop. 

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