

Tuberous Begonias

Tuberous begonia bulbs are usually available starting mid January through March. The earlier you select your tubers, the better selection you will have. Generally speaking, larger tubers will produce larger plants. The most popular are usually 1.5" to 3" in diameter. Be sure the tubers are not soft and mushy or dry and shriveled. They are available in upright varieties and 'hanging basket' varieties. The color range is wide and some are even multicolored such as "Picotee". Some are 'rose form' and 'camellia form'. The latter have petals that look like they have been trimmed with pinking shears.

The tuber is usually a little concave with the "dimple" being the top of the bulb where the new sprouts will form. Loose potting medium that drains well is ideal. Begonias like ample amounts of organic material in the soil mix. Be generous with redwood compost and peat moss. In containers, use a peat based potting soil. The bulbs can be planted in the ground or in pots. If you use pots, they should be on the large size (8"-12" diameter) so the plants do not tip over. Clay pots are often used because of the added weight and increased drainage. Plant the tuber so that it is barely covered by about 1/8" of soil mix. Be sure the sprout (found in the hollow part of the tuber) is facing up. The new growth will force its way up shortly. They will do best in a bright filtered shaded area. Be sure it is not too dark. Keep the soil moist at all times, do not allow it to dry out, but do not keep it soggy wet. If it dries out it will damage the fine roots that form shortly after planting. When the plant has about 1.5" to 2" of new growth, you can start feeding the plant. Liquid fertilizers work well, especially for potted plants. Start with a 10-10-5 or Liquid Fish, at first, to get them off to a good start. Use these at the rate of one tablespoon per gallon of water. Do not guess, use a measuring spoon. If you use this every week or 10 days, the new growth will grow rapidly and the leaves will be very lush and large.

When you first see buds forming, you will want to change to a lower nitrogen fertilizer, such as a 2-10-10 or 0-10-10 or something similar for larger blooms. Again feed at the same 7-10 day sequence. Do not be afraid of getting the diluted fertilizer on the foliage, some nutrients will be absorbed by the leaves; however most of the fertilizer goes in through the root system. Often it is wise to put one to three short bamboo stakes by the plants to add support and help keep them from breaking. The plants can get very heavy, especially when in bloom.

As the weather warms in May, June and July, you should have large plants with spectacular blooms that you will be very proud of. They are truly fantastic blooming plants. Some blooms will reach 8" in diameter depending upon the variety. Watch for insect pests. If you see any, use a systemic insecticide about every two weeks, or if you prefer an organic control, try one with Pyrethins in it. Soap sprays may discolor the blooms. As the flowers start to brown or fade, remove them by pinching the soft stem or cutting with a pointed shear. Remove all the dead or dying blooms, because if left on the plant they become a host for fungus diseases that could damage the plant. More blooms will form shortly, as long as it is warm but not too hot, and you keep fertilizing.

These wonderful plants should bloom through September with reasonable care. The tuber can be kept after the plant dies by placing the pot on its side to avoid too much water in winter months. If you have the plants in the ground, you will probably want to lift the bulbs and store them in a cool, dry area. Use slightly moist peat moss or wood shavings until you're ready to replant in spring.

