

# Growing Begonias from Seed: *The Easy Way\** Freda Holley

All my life I've been fascinated with growing things from seed and over the years have grown everything from apples to zinnias. In fact, the availability of begonia seed through the ABS Seed Fund was one of the American Begonia Society's big attractions for me early on.

From my experience, I initially imagined growing these exotic begonias from those tiny seed would be difficult and since my first seedling tomatoes were taken down in their prime by damp-off, I've always had a healthy respect for the dangers that can befall seedlings. Therefore, I did all the things I could to make growing begonias from seed difficult. I sterilized everything in sight, used a heating cable and bright fluorescent lights and proceeded in everything with extreme caution. Gradually, I learned that most of this was overkill and even detrimental. The methods I use now are both much simpler and, for me, more effective. Growing begonias from seed is actually very easy and begonia seedlings are amazingly sturdy.

If you wonder, why grow from seed when plants are so easy to come by from cuttings, I would say, first that I've always found my seedlings, perhaps because I can select the very best of the lot, to be healthier and better growers. They have been selected after all to grow well under my conditions. Too, many species are only available from seed and I know that when I grow from seed I am helping to maintain the genetic variability of the plant species I love. It is also essential to hybridizing my own special creations.

## Planting



From Sam's Club, I buy a box of 1 oz. plastic portion cups. There are enough here to last through many seed plantings; if you don't want to be so ambitious, you can sometimes pick up a few at salad bars. Using an ice pick, I puncture holes in the bottom of as many of these as I will need for one planting spree. (I usually plant about 50 cups at a time, but keep some handy for when I just want to trial some seed.) It is important to punch these holes from inside to the outside, otherwise holes in the opposite direction will create a little water reservoir at the bottom. Good drainage is always important to begonias.

I buy small bags of Jiffy Mix (for seed starting [nonorganic] or Promix) and Perlite. These are sterile media and by using them I no longer have to sterilize anything. I mix well the two ingredients at about a 1:1 ratio in a half-gallon plastic ice cream carton or a large cottage cheese container depending on how many seed cups I plan to start. The containers are only filled about halfway so mixing will not be difficult. I then add plain tap water and mix thoroughly.

Using a slotted spoon, I fill a number of the 1 oz. cups with my mix, tamping them down slightly with my finger. As I fill these I place them on a recycled yellow plastic meat tray to drain. I also have at hand a stack of small note sheets; a disposable aluminum cake pan with a clear plastic top (This holds about 50 of the cups. I bought a lot of these one time at an after Christmas closeout, but now there are many recyclable clear plastic bakery trays with lids that could serve the same purpose); a permanent marker; a ball-point pen; and a spiral notebook.

I label each cup with the marker and enter its name in my seed notebook, noting its source, date of planting, and any other

information I may have. Later, I go back and note the time of germination.

To germinate, seedlings need a constant temperature of around 70 degrees. A heat mat will probably overheat them and I never use one; instead I plant and keep seedlings inside and do this at times when the inside temperature will be constant - that is when it is very hot with the a/c maintaining temperature, or in the middle of winter when the heater maintains it. Humidity will not matter since the seedlings are covered, but humidity is extremely important so keeping them in a covered container is essential. I keep my seedlings on a baker's rack to which I have attached GE light sticks (also available at Walmart). These are 20 watts and work fine. You may also simply attach one of these to a file folder hanger, cheap and also from Walmart. Add an inexpensive timer and you will be all set for them to care for themselves. Thus you supply the three things necessary for seedling germination and growth: light, warmth, and humidity.



### First Transplant



For their next stage of growth, I use deli containers which are about the same size as the small, flat margarine containers which I also save and use. I buy these by the sleeve from our grocery store at a reasonable price. These shallow containers work best for me at this stage and they still fit into the covered cake pans. A number of seedlings planted together seem to grow faster than isolated seedlings for some reason. I do this first transplant just as soon as my portion cups showing any crowding at all. I punch my holes in the bottom, again punching from the inside out, and fill each tray with a slightly less porous mix of the Jiffy Mix and Perlite: about 2:1.

Using one of my deli trays, filled with water, I wet each portion cup and then loosen the seedlings using a sharp knife tip. I use a pair of pointed tweezers to prick each seedling out and settle it into my soup mix in the container. At this point, I cut triangular labels from coffee can plastic tops, again I put the name and planting date on each label. These labels fit down snugly into the deli pans and under the plastic top of the aluminum pan. Growth rates vary even more than germination rates so I check seedlings every morning. If the seedlings are very tiny, but crowded, I sometimes move them in clumps. I've also transplanted some seedling in desperation when they refuse to grow with good results. I rarely have to water until this first transplanting, but if I do it is from the bottom.

Again, when the seedlings in the deli container begin to show any sign of crowding, it is time to move them up. At last, the seedlings go out on their own in this stage. (At times, I may still keep them two or three to a cup if I think they need moving, but remain fairly small.) For this I use clear plastic 8 ounce drink cups again bought by the sleeve at Sam's for a very reasonable price, but they are available in smaller quantities at most grocery stores. These are ideal because they are shallow and transparent. I can see the roots forming and know when they need moving on again.



For both the second and third transplant I continue to use the Jiffy Mix/Perlite mix, but gradually lowering the ration of the Perlite. They continue to be covered initially at the first transplant, but by this time they are in a nursery tray with a lid. This lid can be gradually lifted a little longer each day to begin the hardening off process when the seedlings have grown to the top of the lid. These are trays I buy at Walmart in the garden shop complete with the plastic top dome. I continue to keep the plants in drink cups under lights, but if a greenhouse or covered area outside in a humid, warm climate is available they will usually be quite happy.

### **Up and Out**

When they have grown to size in the drink cups, the seedlings are at last ready to graduate to regular plant status. They go into 3 or 4 inch pots in a regular grow mix and I move them outside. I usually like to plant in November or December so that this move is timed just right for spring. Of course, there are a few varieties that are so slow in growth that they must be pampered under lights and cover for a much longer period. Or, as you will know, some are so finicky that they must forever remain as terrarium plants.

From this point, I enjoy my plants as they grow, bloom, and set seed anew to start the process all over again. It is a never ending miracle that is the gateway to enjoying new species or even creating your very own new hybrids. The quote one proverb: "All the gardens of tomorrow are in the seeds of today."

\*This is an adaptation of the seminar given at a Southwest Region Get-Together

