

***Begonia grandis* – An Unrecognized Hardy Begonia**

Regardless of whether I am talking to an experienced gardener or nongardener alike, some plants are simply recognized by everyone. For example, Pansies are well-known for colorful spring color, petunias for their summer blooms and Chrysanthemums for frosty autumn displays. Begonias are another well-recognized plant, typically known as a houseplant or summer annual. However, Begonias are not recognized as a winter hardy perennial, especially in New Jersey! Yet, for a shady woodland garden, it is hard to beat the long and rich floral display of *Begonia grandis*, commonly known as simply Hardy Begonia.

Begonias belong to the Begoniaceae or Begonia Family and are native to Central and South America, the Caribbean, Central and Southern Africa and Southeastern Asia. The Begonia Family is also one of the largest families with over 2,000 species, possibly explaining why they rank among the more readily recognized plants. The genus was initially named by the French Franciscan Monk and botanist Charles Plumier



(1646-1704) in honor of the French colonial official and naturalist Michel Bégon (1638-1710). From 1682-1686 Bégon was the Intendent or Governor of the Lesser Antilles and became familiar with the wealth of plant material on the islands. In 1688, King Louis XIV asked Bégon to recommend a botanist for a plant collecting expedition to these islands. Bégon selected the physician and botanist Francois Surian (?-1691) who in turn asked Plumier to assist on the expedition. Despite the two botanists becoming entangled and divided over an argument during the expedition, both continued to explore individually. As a credit to the botanical eye of Plumier, he found six different species of an unknown plant which he named *Begonia* in 1690. The name was subsequently adopted by the Swedish botanist Carl Linnaeus (1707-1778) in 1753.



Begonia grandis is native to a vast area of China, stretching from the Central regions East to the Pacific and Taiwan. It was originally described in 1791 by the Swedish botanist Jonas Carlson Dryander (1748-1810). The species epithet means large, describing the plant's ability to readily reach heights and widths of two feet, and occasionally near three feet if conditions are ideal. It is

unclear as to where Dryander received his specimen to study, although there were numerous individuals beginning to collect and distribute plants from China. One such individual was Thomas Evans (1751-1814), a clerk in the finance department for the East India Company. As the Company name implies, it initially focused on trade with the East Indies and later expanded into Southeastern Asia. Through his job, he was able to develop connections with nurseries and plant collectors in the port city of Canton (now Guangzhou), which in turn allowed him to amass a large collection of rare and exotic plants that he grew at his home in Stephney, near the east end of London. He is credited with being among the first to introduce this Begonia to England. The English botanist and botanical artist Henry Charles Andrews (1794-1830) was introduced to this plant through Evans and, unknowing of Dryander's work nearly 20 years prior, proceeded to describe and name the plant *Begonia evansiana* in 1810.

Andrews' ode to Evans was eventually discredited since, by botanical decree the first properly described name is the accepted name. Unfortunately, the name remained in use long enough to become accepted by nurseries and this is often the name used by nurseries and retailers today.



Adding to the name melee, there remains yet one additional name that is commonly seen in the trade. As one might suspect, a plant with such a vast native range as Hardy Begonia is bound to have some physical variations. This is especially true when wild populations become geographically separated by mountain ranges that prevent open movement of pollinators. In addition, Hardy Begonia is found growing at elevations between 150' to over 10,000', once again separating

populations and pollinators geographically! Clearly, a plant growing near sea level might develop a different phenotype or appearance than a plant growing near a mount pass! In 1939 the German botanist and Begonia specialist Edgar Irmscher (1887-1968) proposed several subspecies to describe plants with slightly different physical characteristics due to these unique environmental niches. One such subspecies was *Begonia grandis* subsp. *evansiana*, which he felt was unique for its sturdy stems and attractive light red pigmentation beneath the leaf. It has since been determined that this plant is actually synonymous with *Begonia grandis*, although the name once again appears often in literature and catalogues!

As with so many plants, botanists and gardeners struggle to determine the proper botanical name. However, there is no denying that Evans introduced a beautiful



plant into horticulture! In fact, even if it never flowered it would make a stunning foliage plant. The asymmetrical and ovately shaped leaves are rather coarse, measuring 4-8" long and wide as seen above left. The foliage is olive-green on the upper surface with a cordate or heart-shaped leaf base. When seen from above, the veins are light red and radiate outward throughout the leaf from the leaf petiole. When seen from beneath (pictured above right), the lacework of deep red interconnecting veins is far more prominent, with the protruding veins seemingly glued to the underside surface. It is foretelling of how the plant could be used atop a wall or wherever the undersides of the foliage can be appreciated. The somewhat brittle stems are also decorative, being light green in color along the internodes and red at the joints.

As attractive as the foliage appears, the pink flowers are truly the reason for growing the plant.



All Begonias are monoecious, whereby male and female flowers appear separately but on the same plant. The flowers appear on branched structures called cymes. A cyme has a central stem, from which numerous lateral stems extend outward and usually upward. The terminal flower of the central stem develops and opens first, followed by flowers at the tips of the lateral stems. The cymes are well protected by green leafy bracts, with the terminal flower seen emerging from the bracts at left.

Interestingly, the terminal flower is typically male (as seen in the second image on page 1) and subsequent lateral flowers are mostly female. Rather curious as well is how all the flowers of the cyme are not simply 'packaged' within these initial set of bracts. Rather, as seen at left (behind the pink bud), the lateral portions of the cyme with the female flowers to come are contained within a secondary set of protective bracts.

Although cymes are normally flat-topped and upward facing, with Begonias the cymes are far more lax and nod downward. The stems of the cymes are also red in color, adding to the ornamental display (again seen in the second image on page 1). For the individual flowers, there is no distinction between the petal and the outer protective calyx of the bud. In these cases, the showy part of the flower is called a

tepala! On the male or staminate flowers, there are typically two large vertically oriented tepals combined with two far smaller, horizontal tepals with a conspicuous ball of yellow stamens in the center. By contrast, the female or pistillate flowers (seen at right) usually lack the horizontal tepals but have a large, three-winged pink ovary at the flower's base and three small stigmas at the





center. As fall approaches, the tepals drop while the enlarging ovaries remain pink and continue to add an ornamental touch. In fact, to the unknowing they can be mistaken for pink flowers!

With the advent of the cooler weather of October, the leaves start to fall from the plant and another fascinating aspect of the plant is revealed – bulbils! These pea-sized spherical structures are actually small tubers and while most tubers

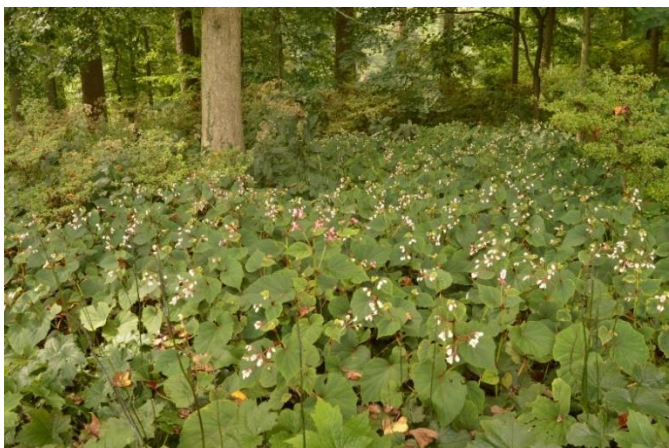
develop underground, these develop in the leaf axils along slender, almost cobweb-like new stems (pictured at far right)! The

bulbils are ovoid, with a large rounded base that draws to a sharp point at the tip (pictured above). The bulbils are genetically identical to the parent plant and are the primary method of reproduction, leading to masses of genetically identical plants. In the image at immediate right, taken in June, the young plant can be seen emerging from the very shallow bulbil. The first time I grew the plant, I was amazed at how quickly it ‘self-seeded’ and



spread into a large mass. Little did I know the rapid, ‘rabbit-like’ reproduction rate was not due to seeds at all! These tubers along with the collapsing plant should be allowed to remain on top of the ground during winter since the bulbils need sunlight to ‘germinate’ or activate growth the following spring. Covering the bulbils with soil diminishes their ability to sprout and the

remnants of the frosted plants provide the needed protection from winter’s chill.



Although Begonias species are noted for their ease of crossing and hybridizing with one another, there are remarkably few hybrids of Hardy Begonia. However, one exceptional white flowered form is the cultivar ‘Alba’ and is a great choice for brightening a shaded location as seen at left. The stems of the cymes are not as red



in color as the pink flowered forms, yet are still an attractive light pink. The foliage retains the same dramatic red venation as the pink flowered forms and it reproduces just as quickly through bulbils. If you wish to sustain a mass of this cultivar as all white flowering, it is important to keep the plants isolated from pink flowered forms or rogue out any pink flowered seedlings. In general, white flowered varieties

are genetically recessive, much like blue eyes in humans. When crossed with the pink flowered forms the seedlings – although not plentiful in numbers – will be pink and ultimately will outcompete the white forms. In the planting above at the Winterthur Garden in Delaware, a pink seedling is visible in the center of the image, which should be rogued out.

Begonia grandis is a very easy plant to grow in light shade. The coarse texture of the foliage contrasts beautifully with the slender foliage of ferns and shade loving grasses or sedges. Flowers begin to appear by mid-August and continue into late September, with the colorful seed pods providing additional interest well into October (*Begonia grandis* ‘Alba’ is pictured above in early October). Typical



to all Begonias, the stems are brittle and care should be taken when weeding or otherwise working around the plants. At Winterthur Gardens, they made great use of the form ‘Alba’ by planting masses of the plant in a shaded glen, where it creates a unique groundcover! By January, the seeds have turned tan (as seen above), but still provide a subtle degree of interest.

Plants prefer well-drained yet moist and humus rich soils with a pH between 6-7. If soils are prone to droughts, they should be amended with additional compost to improve water retention. Although the plants are hardy from zones 6-8, it is beneficial in more northerly regions to mulch the plants with shredded leaves come fall, allowing the plant to survive below zero temperatures while still allowing light to reach the bulbils.

Whether a houseplant or an outdoor annual, Begonias are a well-recognized plant by many. Having struggled over the years with Begonias as houseplants, I can say with conviction that *Begonia grandis* is a far more gracious plant to grow and enjoy in the garden. Perhaps Begonias should become better recognized as a hardy perennial as well!



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