



Cane (angel wing) begonias include *Begonia coccinea* 'Sinbad,' left, and B. 'Don Miller,' center. At right, a Rhizomatous begonia, B. 'Plum Gorgeous'

BEGONIAS FOR THE GREATER HOUSTON AREA

by Tony Collins

Everyone is familiar with the tough as nails fibrous rooted "bedding" begonias. In either the green or bronze leaf version, they are useful for adding almost constant blooms to a sunny area. The begonia group, however, is much larger than these utilitarian stand-bys, and offers some excellent cultivars, especially hybrids, for the Houston area.

The two types most recommended for here are the cane type and the rhizomatous. The canes have tall growing stalks - some up to 4' or more in height - and have usually small pink or red flowers growing in clusters and hanging down from the stems. Rhizomatous - as the name suggests - sends fleshy stalks along the soil, sometimes over the edge of the pot, from which rises more or less individual leaves and bloom stalks. Although some of these types will adjust to growing in a well-drained and shaded bed, the usual practice is to grow them in pots.

One of the great charms of the begonias is the variety of leaf forms and colors they offer. The cane type usually has some version in green (plain or spotted) of the "angel wing" shape. The B.'Sinbad' and B. 'Don



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Miller' canes come in handsome silver tones and do well here. The Rhizomatous offer a remarkable variety of leaf shapes and colors. B. 'Plum Gorgeous' has mahogany colored leaves the size of dinner plates. Since begonias come from moist environments, they enjoy our Houston humidity; although with the exception of the bedding types, they cannot take our Houston sun, especially in the summer. Bright shade, as under a tree or arbor, is recommended. Being semi-succulent, begonias cannot tolerate poor drainage. Although pricey, Sunshine Mix #4 is ideal for growing them, but any light mix will do.

Begonias are gross feeders - frequent application of a liquid all purpose fertilizer will keep them growing. Not totally hardy here - a greenhouse or heating cable with frost cloth cover are ideal protection. Begonias are easily propagated from cuttings, and although some nurseries carry hybrid begonias, the best source of plants is one of the branches of the American Begonia Society (ABS). Like all gardeners, begonia growers enjoy sharing.

You can reach Tony through my email: lazygardener@sbcglobal.net. To reach one of our many area chapters of the American Begonia Society, log onto: <http://begoniahouston.org>