

BEGONIA BASICS



When you say “begonias,” you’re talking about a large, diverse family of plants. It includes varieties that reach 8 feet (*or even taller!*) and others that are just a few inches high. Some bear brilliantly colored flowers, while some are prized for their lush foliage. **They are warm-climate plants that don’t survive winters in the mid-Atlantic region**, so they are grown outdoors either as annuals (*and replaced each season*) or dug up in the fall, stored and replanted in the spring. A few kinds of begonias are especially well-suited to growing indoors year-round, and they are the focus of this information.

Plant Picks

Cane-stemmed type. These begonias, which include the distinctive angel wing and dragon wing varieties, grow thick, upright, cane-like stems and fibrous roots. They bear clusters of pink, white, or red flowers that cascade from the ends of stems, and they may bloom a few times throughout the year. Their leaves are large, asymmetrical, spotted or variegated, and attractive when the plant is not in bloom. Experienced indoor begonia growers recommend this type for beginners, as it tends to be more adaptable to varying light or moisture levels.

Rex type. The large and showy leaves are the main attraction for begonias. They come in dramatic patterns and combinations of greens, red, purple, silver, white, and more. The flowers are insignificant, so many growers simply pinch them off so they don’t detract from the foliage display, but the leaves make up for their lack of interesting blooms.

Good Conditions

Both cane and rex type begonias grow best in bright, indirect light year-round and will be damaged by direct sunlight. Rex begonias can tolerate less light than other begonias, while many growers of angel wing and other cane begonias supplement natural light with fluorescent lights during the fall and winter.

With their long canes and big blossoms, cane begonias are well-suited to heavy ceramic or clay pots. Just be sure there are clear drainage holes in the bottom. These plants prefer to be a little root-bound, so the best pots are an inch or two larger than the root balls.

Rex begonias grow from shallow, knobby rhizomes (*sort of like a bulb*), so they do best in large, relatively shallow pots where the rhizome has room to spread. Unglazed clay or terra cotta pots allow the roots to breathe because

they are porous. Plastic pots are lighter and less breakable, but you must be especially careful to not overwater. Moss baskets are an effective and attractive choice many growers use for begonias.

Indoor begonias fare best when temperatures stay between 65 and 75 degrees Fahrenheit. Be sure to keep them away from cold drafts, such as near windows in winter or air-conditioners during the summer. Cane-stemmed types are adapted to relatively high humidity, so put them in bathrooms, kitchens, and other humid spaces in your home. You can also mist them regularly. While rex begonias prefer moderately high humidity, do not mist them. Lingering water droplets on the beautiful leaves can become a breeding ground for powdery mildew, an ugly fungal disease.

Care And Maintenance

Water. Like all indoor houseplants, begonias cannot tolerate soggy soil. Water them thoroughly, then let the soil surface become dry to the touch before wetting it again. You can tell when begonias are too dry—the edges of their leaves begin to turn brown.

Fertilizer. Feed begonias with a dilute liquid organic fertilizer. Follow application instructions carefully because overfeeding leads to unhealthy, unsustainable growth and can burn plants. During blooming season (*in later winter or spring*), cane begonias benefit from high-phosphorus fertilizer to support flowering.

Pruning. In early winter, prune older growth from cane begonias, which prevents the plant from becoming leggy. Leave new stems alone. Throughout the year, pinch off dead flowers as soon as they appear.



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Care And Maintenance cont.

Repotting. Repot indoor begonias every year or two, giving them fresh soil mix. When they begin to look cramped in their pots, put them in a slightly bigger container. Winter is the best time for repotting.

Outdoor time. You can move your begonias outdoors during the warm months, but be sure to put them in a spot that's mostly shaded. **Bring them in when nighttime temperatures drop back into the 50s.**

Pest control. If you see white powdery mildew on your begonias, mix up a tablespoon of baking soda in a quart of water and spray the leaves with the solution. Mealy bugs can show up on indoor plants in warm, humid conditions. They have oval bodies ringed with waxy filaments and distinct parallel segments. The waxy-white, slow-moving, wingless females typically feed in large, sticky colonies. Giving the plant a good shower often washes them off. If they persist, brush the pests with a cotton swab or small paint brush dipped in ordinary rubbing alcohol, which kills them on contact.

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