

## CHAPTER 4

### BEGONIAS IN THE MODERN WORLD

Begonias, along with many other exotic plants, did not become generally well known until the 1800s when leading European nurserymen realised that there were many beautiful and interesting plants yet to be found and exploited in distant parts of the world. So began a great period of discovery with plant hunters being commissioned by the important nurseries of Europe to search for the botanical riches of these foreign lands. Many new plants were discovered during this time and begonias featured amongst them, being found in the tropical and sub-tropical countries of Central and South America, Africa, the Indian sub-continent, China and the lands and islands of South East Asia. The search for new species continues to-day with a few hardy souls risking the dangers of tropical forests and foreign climes to increase our knowledge and stock of this incredible plant family. To them I doff my hat and express my thanks and admiration.

Begonias in their natural habitats generally occur in small and isolated pockets in areas ranging from the hot and humid lowlands of Brazil to the cool heights of the Tropics, from the dry areas of Mexico to tropical locations in peninsular Malaysia, and from the great river plains of southern Africa to the highlands of Papua New Guinea. No begonias have been discovered in Australia. So we see that begonias come from a great variety of habitats, which means that amongst them one can find plants that will be happy in many different locations. Couple this with their incredible ability to become acclimatised over a relatively short period and you have a most attractive family of plants suitable for many different climates, situations and applications. Consider *B. boliviensis*, a tuberous species whose habitat is the freezing heights of the Andes Mountains in Bolivia and Argentina but which grows readily in many temperate areas of the world as a summer flowering beauty, or again *B. socotrana* which is summer dormant in the scorching heat of the island of Socotra but has been used to produce the stunning indoor begonia hybrids called variously Elatior, Hiemalis and Cheimantha which decorate so many living rooms world-wide.

Begonias respond readily to cross pollination and many thousands of beautiful cultivars have been, and still are being, produced - so many in fact that the species themselves are at risk of being overlooked; the latest count shows some 1,600 species in cultivation to-day, with no count available of the cultivars apart from those already registered with the American Begonia Society. Preservation of species of all types is a most important aspect of all horticultural endeavours – do try to include them in your