

SEMPERFLORENS CULTORUM

Garden borders are well catered for in the Begonia family and the well known wax flower is the star, correctly referred to as *Begonia Semperflorens-Cultorum* which as the name implies are all cultivars. Growing these begonias to perfection requires some special effort and expertise and many gardeners, not being aware of the 'tricks of the trade', do not get the best from them. These floral beauties must be planted *en masse* in order to achieve the best result. I shudder whenever I see a garden with a border of semps, as they are fondly referred to, planted in a single row and a foot (30 cms) apart. They will not do well for they are gregarious beings and must have close company in order to thrive. So, plant close and plant many; if a border is required then make it at least 3 plants deep and 10 to 15 cms (4 to 6 inches) apart. Better still, if space allows and you have enough plants, plant them in a mass. What fun you can have with the colours! I have seen them in a solid colour to each garden bed, I have seen them planted in a variety of patterns, and I have seen them planted willy-nilly without regard to colour, and all those plantings looked superb.

Position is the next important element in growing wonderfully showy semps. Although we say that they will grow equally well in sun or shade, they will become leggy if the shade is too deep and will not do as well as expected if the sun is too hot for prolonged periods. Try for a spot which receives a good four hours or a little more of sunshine each day.

The growing medium is important with all garden plants, but especially so with these bedding beauties which are indeed gross feeders. Prepare a rich garden bed with plenty of humus and animal manures dug in and a good dressing of controlled release fertiliser, and once planted, maintain a feeding program throughout the year for they never stop growing in any but the coldest regions.

Don't just plant, feed and forget. They need ongoing care for best results, and this consists of regular tip pruning in the early stages of growth. Pinch off every flower and bud when first they appear, then repeat this treatment in two more weeks and again two weeks after that. Sounds drastic I know, and many gardeners just can't bear to do it, but the results will astonish and delight. Water regularly, fertilise as specified and you will soon see that the pruning was well worth while, for you will be rewarded with masses of blooms for many, many months. *Semperflorens* after all translates as 'ever flowering'.

Finally, when the plants eventually get leggy and a bit unsightly, prune them hard, almost to ground level, fertilise at once, and new growth will spring from the roots in a few short weeks and the whole cycle is repeated. You should get at least two seasons of growth and certainly more if you really look after them. Their one failing is that they are prone to attack by powdery mildew and treatment with a preventative spray is recommended.