

PART 1

A BACKGROUND TO BEGONIAS

CHAPTER 1

A GARDEN IN THE CITY

The Royal Botanic Gardens (RBG) in Sydney, Australia, is one of the most significant Botanic Gardens of the world, situated on the shores of Sydney Harbour within a short walk of the Central Business District and right beside our world-famous Opera House. Visitors marvel at the garden's proximity to the never-ending noise and bustle of this great city of the Antipodes, and yet it is a haven of peace and beauty. Thirty hectares (75 acres) of extremely valuable real estate dedicated to the study of the botanic sciences and the growing of rare and beautiful trees and plants from across the globe comprise this wonderland, freely open for people to enjoy. And enjoy it they do, for thousands of visitors, local and tourists alike, fill these gardens with happiness throughout the year and take full advantage of the welcoming signs which invite them to walk on the grass and hug the trees. Joggers and serious walkers in the early morn, followed by mothers with their young ones – babes in carriers, babes in prams and strollers and the older ones, riding or on foot, but each and every one enjoying the freedom of the out-of-doors. Come lunchtime and the joggers return, free from the office for a short and sweaty space, whilst the lawns and benches fill with picnickers. And all day long they come, visitors from everywhere, tour groups and backpackers, city and country folk, the old and the young, and especially the school groups to hopefully learn something of nature from the dedicated staff who daily talk to them about the wonders all around them in this magical garden.

It was not always thus – just 220 odd years ago it was unspoilt bushland seen but briefly *en passant* in 1769 by Captain James Cook during his momentous voyage of discovery, and becoming in 1788 a dumping ground for England's criminals sentenced to transportation. Despite this inauspicious beginning Sydney has become a great modern city of some four million people, but reminders of its heritage are to be seen in many places, not least of all in this Garden in the City.

Our experience of this, for my wife and I worked closely together for many years here, began when we were asked in 1996 to plant a garden of Begonias, for the garden bed we were allocated was exactly where the very first crops were planted all those years ago, a contemporary account describing a