

The semi-tuberous begonias, mostly from South Africa, form an interesting group within the begonia family. They are suited to garden cultivation in tropical areas and do not relish cold winters, when they are prone to lose their leaves. However they will come back in spring if the winter has not been too harsh. I do not regard them as ideal garden subjects and the growing of them is best undertaken in controlled conditions in shade and glass-houses. They all produce small white flowers from summer through autumn and are prone to leaf fall when under stress, which may merely be a sudden change in weather conditions. All the South African species (*macbethii*, *natalensis*, *partita*, *homonyma* etc), are thought to be variations of *B. dregei*, whilst from Bolivia comes *B. wollnyi*.

### **Starting off**

It is probably a very good idea to grow your first tuberous begonias from seed (see Part 4: Propagation). This way you will get a great many plants with which to gain experience and when you graduate to buying named tubers (an expensive business) you will not be likely to lose them. Tuberous begonias grown from seed will be a mixed lot as regards colour, type and size of bloom and amongst them you are more than likely to find one or more very good plants. After all, this is the way in which the large flowered named varieties are produced, with several thousand seedlings being raised to obtain, perhaps, just one show quality begonia. Sow seed in late winter. This may mean that you need bottom heat to ensure germination within a reasonable period and this may be found in the house on top of the refrigerator or the floor level storage water heater. Alternatively, simple heating pads are available from specialist gardening suppliers. You may also be able to find tuberous begonia seedlings in your local nursery at a reasonable price and these again are ideally suited for the first time grower.

### **The Growing Cycle**

Tubers, which have been stored during dormancy, are potted into fresh growing medium in early spring, making sure that they are inserted concave side up and covered with potting medium to a depth of one or two centimetres, and watering is commenced. Choose a deep pot which just comfortably accommodates the tuber and ensure that the potting mix contains a controlled-release fertiliser which is labelled 'complete' (ie. contains all the necessary nutrients, including the micro-nutrients or trace elements).

Shoots appear as small pink swellings on the top of the tuber, often whilst they are still in winter storage, and these very quickly develop into strong plants. If there are more than one of these, the surplus shoots may be removed and put down as cuttings. Fertilise with a good water soluble fertiliser every two