

weeks. The only problem that you may encounter during the growing period is powdery mildew and I recommend that preventative spraying be carried out as soon as conditions appear right for the onset of this fungus (refer to Chapter 12).

As the plant grows so the tuber increases in size and potting-on is necessary during the growing period. Select a pot one size larger each time you re-pot and use fresh mix. Tuberous begonias need to be staked and this is done as soon as the plant appears to need it. Make sure that you do not pierce the tuber with the stake, inserting it behind the plant and tying with a soft material to prevent damage to the stem. Grafting tape and florists' tape are both ideal for this purpose as they will stretch as the stem increases in size. If your non-stops are intended for the garden this is the time to plant them out.

The first buds will appear as the plant approaches maturity and these should be removed to ensure larger and better blooms later. Remove no more than the first half dozen buds then allow the others to develop and open. Tuberous begonias grown from seed may produce only very small blooms in their first year - do not despair but persist with them for another season when the blooms may well be bigger and better. However some of these seedling begonias may well produce large and colourful flowers in their first season. Tubers of named varieties should of course produce large and spectacular blooms, arguably the most beautiful of all the flowers. So large in fact can these blooms become that they may need to be supported so that their full beauty can be admired. A simple wire support is used for this purpose and should be available from specialist nursery suppliers. The large blooms are the male flowers whilst the small and rather insignificant ones are female. Many specialist growers remove the female flowers to encourage the males to grow even larger.

The growing cycle from planting the tuber to flowering takes some 4 to 5 months so that plantings made in late winter/early spring are at their best in late summer/early autumn.

Once flowering has finished the plants should be allowed to die back ready for dormancy and this is encouraged by a gradual lessening of the amount of water supplied and the cessation of fertilising. It is important that this dying back be allowed to take its natural course as at this time the tubers are storing up their reserves of strength for the next flowering season. Eventually the stems will fall away and the tuber should then be lifted, cleaned by rubbing away any soil adhering to it, dusted with sulphur powder to deter insect attack whilst in storage and then stored in a flat tray and covered with peat moss or similar material. Put the tray in a dark, cool place and leave until the following spring. Some growers leave the tubers in their pots which they turn on their sides for the winter, a practice I do not subscribe to as I think that cleaning the tuber and dusting with sulphur will ensure a sound tuber for the next season.