

essential humidity will no longer be present. In this case it is good practice to put these plants out of doors when you retire.

Soil or Mix Dried Out?

There may be times when garden soil or potting mix becomes so dry as to be difficult to re-wet and in such cases a wetting agent should be used in the water. In fact it is good practice to treat soil or mix with such an agent at the recommended intervals so that the problem does not arise. Do not confuse the term 'wetting agent' with water storage or retention crystals, and do not be tempted to use household detergents instead of the specially formulated products made for horticultural use.

Fertilising

I have already advised in chapter 8 that, when preparing garden beds for begonias, a dressing of controlled release fertiliser be applied. This can be an organic such as pelletised fowl manure or blood and bone, or one of the commercial products such as Osmocote® or Nutricote®. Make sure that you note when you applied this fertiliser and what its 'life' is so that you can re-apply when due. Whatever you use ensure that it contains all the necessary nutrients, ie Nitrogen, Phosphorus and Potassium (the primary nutrients - shown by their chemical symbols of N, P and K); Calcium, Magnesium and Sulphur (the secondary nutrients - Ca, Mg and S); and Boron, Copper, Manganese, Chlorine, Molybdenum and Zinc (the micro-nutrients or trace elements - B, Cu, Mn, Cl, Mo and Zn). The nutrient content of any fertiliser should be indicated on the package, shown as a percentage by volume. The trace elements can be purchased separately, as can all the other nutrients.

Begonias need a regular feeding program and I recommend a fortnightly application during the growing period of a suitable soluble fertiliser. This is particularly important for pot grown plants as modern potting mixes have little ability to store nutrients, whereas the period between fertilising garden grown begonias may be increased to perhaps four weeks. In the early stages of growth and after pruning this should be rich in Nitrogen but when the flowering period approaches you should use a fertiliser with less Nitrogen but increased Potassium. The flowering period of begonias will vary according to the particular type and the local growing conditions. There are winter flowering begonias which of course are still growing and needing fertiliser when other plants have slowed their growth for the cold weather. In our semi-tropical and tropical regions begonias go on growing all year round and the need for feeding does not