Tuberous begonias are spectacular plants perfectly suited for Alaska’s cool weather. There are many varieties which include single, double, ruffled, and rose-like flowers in brilliant colors. The flowers of hanging basket types cascade gracefully over the side completely hiding the container.

A “traffic-stopper” is the upright double-ruffled tuberous begonia. Its huge deep green leaves are supported by two-inch thick stems which grow 12–18 inches tall, topped off with six-inch blooms.

Tuberous begonias can be grown by home gardeners without difficulty if a few guidelines are followed. In addition to cool weather, begonias like light shade, and need to be protected from the wind. Most begonias are planted in containers, to ensure good drainage and air circulation. Overwatering and poor air circulation are the two main problems associated with begonia culture. Overwatering will promote tubers to rot and cause flower buds to drop. Poor air circulation and wet foliage will lead to powdery mildew. By taking precautions both problems can be avoided resulting in beautiful begonias year after year.

**Selecting and Starting Tubers**

Select tubers that are large, firm, and free from disease or soft spots. Some varieties or colors tend to have smaller tubers than others. There should be pink or white buds emerging from the concave side. If there are no sprouts this does not mean the tuber is dead. It may not have gotten a head start like the others. Dead tubers are lightweight and spongy or soft.

Start tubers in March. Tuberous begonias are shallow-rooted plants, and starting them in flats works well. It allows their roots to spread out. Tubers can also be started in 5-inch pots. Fill flats or pots with at least 4 inches of a moist, loose soil mix which can drain well. One-half potting soil, 1/4 perlite and 1/4 peat-vermiculite mix works well. Other mixes are also suitable as long as they drain well. Fluff up the soil; don’t pack it down in the flat.

To plant, push the tuber concave side up into the soil by twisting it to the right and left pushing down until the soil line is above the edge of the tuber. If the tuber has no buds and has not started to grow, it is best not to cover the center concave portion. Just firm the soil around the edge and top of the tuber. To prevent the tuber from rotting, do not bury it with wet soil while dormant. Cover the entire tuber only if the buds are 1/2-inch long or more and cover no more than 1/4-inch deep.

**Culture**

As you see stems and foliage emerge from the tubers, it is a good idea to place a fan in a position which will keep air moving between plants. Also, from this point on, water with a non-spraying nozzle to avoid wetting the foliage. Actively growing tubers will require more water than they did in the beginning, but do not water the soil so it becomes sopping wet. Let the top 1/2 inch of the soil dry between waterings.

When foliage is 3 or 4 inches tall it is time to transplant begonias into their permanent containers. All tubers will probably not grow at the same rate. It will be necessary to fill in holes left in the flat to protect the roots of slower growing adjacent plants.

You will notice that most of the leaves of the plant are pointed in one direction. The flowers will also be pointed in this direction so keep this in mind when transplanting. For a hanging basket, two tubers are usually placed back to back with the foliage pointing in opposite directions. However, old specimens may be so large that they fill a 10-inch cedar basket by themselves! Upright varieties can be planted in tubs or other types of planters. Remember they are shallow-rooted and do not require a container with great depth.
Transplant begonias to their new container using a similar soil mix which includes a little bone meal. Lift the tuber keeping much of the soil intact. Set the tuber slightly deeper than it was growing but no more than 3/4-inch below the soil line or the stem could rot. Space upright varieties at least 18 inches apart for good air circulation. Staking will be required as the plants grow.

Fertilize when flower buds appear with a high phosphorous liquid fertilizer every two or three weeks, if necessary. Overfeeding will produce fast and flimsy growth. Foliage should be bright green and flexible. Too much nitrogen results in dark blue-green leaves that are brittle and curl downward around the edges. The bone meal added at transplanting time will release phosphorous slowly during the growing season. Begonias also benefit from a liquid feeding that includes trace elements.

Some begonia growers prune upright varieties to achieve one or two large specimen flowers. They remove all buds on the tuber except for one which then produces a large stem. From that stem they remove most side branches and flower buds so all of the plant’s energy goes to a few large and spectacular flowers. Hanging basket varieties are dis-budded by removing the two female flower buds on each side of the central male flower. Usually there are three buds, two female with seed pods in back of the flower, and one male that produces large double blooms. Female buds are almost always smaller single blooms. If you remove stems, cut them off about 3 inches from the main stem. The stub will fall off on its own time and the main stem will be healed perfectly. If cut too closely, the main stem may be injured or destroyed by disease.

Tuberous begonias like light shade. Good results will be attained as long as begonias receive no more than a half day of sun. Tuberous begonias do well under the overhang of a house because they are protected from strong winds and excessive rain which could saturate soil and foliage. It is important to keep foliage dry or powdery mildew becomes a problem. If a fungicide is used, apply it after all affected plant parts have been removed. It can also be applied regularly as a preventative measure before any signs of the disease have appeared. Keep the plant tidy by removing any fallen petals to avoid the decaying debris from becoming lodged in the axil of the leaves.

**Tuber Storage**

After the plants have been hit by frost, keep them in their containers or remove them with a ball of soil if the container is too large to move. Set plants including stems, roots, and soil in a cool dry place to dry for several weeks. When the stems fall easily and completely from the tuber remove the excess soil and dried roots. The tuber should now look like it did when it was first planted. Wrap each tuber in its own small labeled paper bag. Then place all the small bags in a large double paper grocery bag. Store tubers all winter in a cool dry place, about 40-45°F. Do not water. If grown properly tuber size will increase from year to year and will last indefinitely.

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