



BEGONIA SOCIETY OF WESTERN AUSTRALIA

Growing Begonias

Info. Sheet 2

Potting Mixes

Here in WA it seems the biggest problem for Begonia growers is finding or producing a suitable potting mix. Just when we are confident with a particular brand, something in the mix changes and we have many unhappy Begonias. If you have found a mix which is suitable and reliable, keep right on using it.

A FREE DRAINING MIX: That is, when a potted plant is watered, it drains immediately. No water is left standing on the soil surface.

If a mix is allowed to become too dry it may temporarily resist added water. The solution is to stand the pot in a tray of water and continue watering until there are no air-bubbles escaping from the drainage holes. Of course, ideally no mix should ever be allowed to become so dry.

Most commercial mixes have excellent drainage because of the pine fines and gritty sand used. If an extra loose mix is required for special plants, Perlite can be added. This does not change the pH or chemical make-up of the mix.

THE Ph OF A MIX: A measure of the acidity or alkalinity of a mix. Most Begonias prefer a pH of 6.5. That is, slightly acid. The pH of some mixes is suitable and stable. Others are not. Depending on the original pH of the mix, the quality of water used and the type and frequency of fertiliser used, the soil pH will gradually reduce. If or when a healthy plant stops growing and looks 'tired' the grower should firstly check the pH of the soil. If this is acceptable, then look for other reasons. The mix of a plant which is potted up in spring and is in the same mix six months later will possibly have a lower than desired pH. This can be remedied by watering with a solution consisting of one teaspoon of lime (hydrated or dolomite) in nine litres of water; being careful not to over-do it, because an alkaline soil can be very damaging. Unfortunately, the only way of measuring the pH is by testing the soil - which is tedious.

Some commercial mixes contain fertiliser and a wetting agent. The fertiliser is usually short-lived because of leaching and the wetting agent could be detrimental. The roots of a newly-potted cutting or seedling need to be searching for moisture and nutrients, so that the roots soon fill the small container and the plant can be potted on. If the soil is evenly and continually moist, the roots will have no need to be adventurous. Also, in the cool months of spring and autumn, the mix may stay too damp for too long. Slow-release fertiliser was a wonderful invention, but is not activated until the soil warms - sometimes in late spring. In the meantime, we can liquid feed except that this may keep the mix too wet. The alternative is to add some fertiliser to the mix to nourish the new roots until the slow-release kicks in.

A recommended mix of nutrients is:-

5	parts by volume	blood and bone	180 g into a total of 4 x 9L buckets of potting mix.
3	parts by volume	superphosphate	After mixing, if necessary, add enough lime
1½	parts by volume	potash	to bring the pH up to 6.5.
1¼	parts by volume	sulphate of iron.	

A few years ago, Ross Bolwell, a prominent grower and breeder of begonias from N.S.W., trialled a number of plants for salt-tolerance. He found roses had a high tolerance and wouldn't you know it, begonias had one of the lowest. The salt can be in the potting mix, which will gradually leach out (hopefully before it does much damage) or in the grower's water supply. The signs are a build-up of white substance around the drainage holes and/or dried lead-tips. The remedy, if possible, is to saturate the soil once or twice a week with good quality water.

We should all be aware that regardless of brand or price, a mix is only as good as the quality of the ingredients used. Sometimes, for commercial reasons, the process may be speeded up and the mix is not composted for as long as is ideal. This applies particularly to pine fines, which if too fresh can be toxic for begonias. If necessary the grower can leach 'nasties' from the mix by placing same in a large bin with drainage holes and saturating with good quality water every few days over a couple of weeks.

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