

Better Begonias

When I first got into gardening, I turned my nose up at begonias which, in those ignorant days, meant the annual fibrous begonias. They sat around like lumps, I thought, with colors ranging predictably from pink to red to white and back again.

Then one day I noticed a neighbor's large concrete urn filled with nothing but those lumpen-proletariat annual begonias and, by golly, it was downright elegant — a strong cohesive form that commanded you to perk up and pay attention. My own lumpish mind began to shift a bit.

Seeing other members of the genus—the multicolored leaves of Rex begonias, the rose-like flowers of tuberous and Rieger begonias, the round shiny leaves of beefsteak begonias — piqued my interest further. I even made a few purchases.



Dragon Wing® begonias. Photos Courtesy of Ball Horticultural

And then the Dragon Wing® begonias came on the market. Red first, followed by rose-pink, and they're just about the best thing since the invention of ice cream. The Dragon Wings, developed at Ball Horticultural in West Chicago, have an elegant arching habit like the angel wing begonias from which they're descended. They bloom their little heads off all summer long and a large container of, say, three plants, will have all the neighbors clacking their tongues with envy by the time September rolls around. Three feet in diameter. Maybe four.

This morning I saw masses of them in downtown Chicago where they are part of the very pretty window boxes that encircle the Cultural Center. On Michigan Avenue just north of Randolph, there are plenty more, growing in the giant round concrete containers that line the sidewalks.



'Gryphon' begonia

Dragon Wing begonias perform well in garden beds, too. This year I have six of them at my front gate, interspersed with six of the new 'Gryphon' begonia hybrids, also from Ball. 'Gryphon' has variegated star-shaped gray-green leaves and it's as easy to care for as the Dragon Wings. I've made sure they get watered, but my fertilizing has really been haphazard. Still, they've thrived. When I consider all the deadheading and trimming and fussing I do with my roses and coreopsis and phlox and how I do little to nothing for the begonias, it gives me pause.

As well it should.

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