

In 2009, when they were first introduced to the public, I was smitten by their blazing beauty, and after purchasing and growing them, I devoted a column to them. Since then, my attraction for them has not waned, and I've been showcasing them yearly in the hanging planters on our deck. Both Rita and I feel their beauty is unrivaled, and their care is amazingly effortless.

With the threat of frost looming, and knowing that soon their burning flame will be extinguished by the cold, I am taking the liberty to tout their beauty one more time. The plant is called *Begonia boliviensis* var., and has a more common and befitting name, 'Bonfire'™.



This plant has an interesting background. The original seed was collected in northern Bolivia in 1990 during an expedition of the New Zealand Ministry of Agriculture and Fisheries. The seeds were planted in New Zealand, and after several years of subsequent growth and screening, a patented plant was released and marketed in the USA in 2009.

In 2012, a new cultivar called *Begonia boliviensis* 'Santa Cruz Sunset' was developed from the original 'Bonfire'™ and, it, too, was made available to the public. 'Santa Cruz Sunset' was actually selected as the top winner for the 2012 American Garden Award. Of course, we purchased a number of those plants as well.

Interestingly, both 'Bonfire'™ and 'Santa Cruz Sunset' produce underground bulb-like structures called tubers. Every fall, after frost destroys the foliage of our potted plants, we save and winter over the tubers. The following spring, we simply transplant the tubers into our hanging baskets and once again have beautiful begonias gracing our deck. I've also taken stem cuttings. I've carried the cuttings over indoors for the winter and when spring arrived, I've also transplanted them into our hanging baskets. As a result, the begonias blooming right now are actually a combination of both cultivars.

Each year, these begonias exhibit beauty in their foliage and their flowers. I see little variation between the two cultivars. Both make dramatic statements. They have alternate, two-inch long, one-half inch wide dark green leaves with serrated edges, highlighted with a red margin. A single plant branches well, forming a mound of leaves covered from spring until frost

with vibrant red-orange pendulous blossoms. Hundreds, perhaps thousands, of slender, bell-shaped flowers can be found on a single plant. These begonias grow well in full sun or part shade. I have discovered that those placed in full sun bloom more profusely and have brighter red margins on their leaves.

Maintenance is a breeze. We water our planters on a regular basis yet try to avoid overwatering. Root rot can occur if the soil remains too wet. Occasionally, I fertilize the pots as I water. In the early development of the plant, I often pinch back the stems to encourage a denser growing plant. One exceptional and outstanding characteristic of these plants is they are self-deadheading! As far as I'm concerned, that makes them almost maintenance free.

Although the season is drawing to a close for 2016, I can assure you, when spring returns in 2017, 'Bonfire'<sup>™</sup> and 'Santa Cruz Sunset' will both once again be burning brightly on our deck.