

## Yard and Garden – 07-11-09 – Ted Griess / Extension Horticulture Assistant

Having a bonfire in one's yard is probably not a popular activity for this time of year. However, that is exactly what is happening in our backyard. This bonfire has been aglow for at least five weeks, and the chances of it going out in the near future are slim. Furthermore, this bonfire is ablaze on our wooden deck; and we, nor our neighbors, have yet to summon the fire department.

Before you think I've slipped a cog, allow me to explain. The bonfire I'm referring to is not really a fire; rather it is the registered name of a plant.

Each year, Rita and I attempt to grow a few plants that are new to us. Earlier this spring, while shopping, I discovered a plant called *Begonia boliviensis* var., more commonly called Begonia Bonfire™, a name appropriately and accurately describing its appearance. This small bedding plant's fiery beauty immediately caught my attention. At that moment, I knew I must have one.

Because of its unique appearance, I chose to plant ours in a fourteen-inch container with no other plants. For only a week or two did it appear too small for its container. Soon it completely



filled the pot. It naturally and quickly branched with striking foliage that completely cascaded over the edges of the container.

Bonfire has alternate, two-inch long, one-half inch wide leaves with serrated edges that are highlighted with a red margin. The overall growth pattern of the plant is bush-like and cascading, perfect for growing in containers, window boxes or hanging baskets. Furthermore, the entire plant is covered with a profusion of eye-catching, fiery, red-orange pendulous flowers.

As one can see from its name, it belongs to the genus *Begonia*, a group that includes well over 1500 species. Many species of this group grow best in shade to part shade. Some are grown for the beauty of their foliage



while others are grown for their flowers. Interestingly, *Begonia Bonfire*<sup>TM</sup> exemplifies beauty in its foliage and in its flowers. Furthermore, it grows well in full sun, part shade and even full shade. I did read that if grown in full shade, the plant produces fewer flowers and doesn't grow as well. While growing ours, I've also discovered that if placed in full sun, the margins of the leaves become a brighter red.

*Bonfire* can be grown in the open garden but performs best in a good quality potting mix. The soil needs to be kept moist but well drained. If grown in heavy, wet soil or overwatered, the stems and roots are subject to rot. It is relatively maintenance free and generally not damaged by pests; however, it may be bothered by white flies. It tolerates a mild frost but is not winter hardy for our area. Like most begonias, it can easily be propagated by cuttings.

This plant has an interesting background. The original seed was gathered on a collecting expedition into northern Argentina and Bolivia organized by the New Zealand Ministry of Agriculture and Fisheries in 1990. The plant grew naturally in the mountainous forests, a climate like that of the forests in New Zealand. The seeds of these plants were then planted in New Zealand. The most outstanding genotype of thousands of plants was selected. After several years of subsequent growth and screening, Anthony Tesselaar International was selected to market the plant in Australia for on-going evaluation. The plant was newly released and marketed in the USA for 2009.

Sadly, *Begonia Bonfire*<sup>TM</sup> is not winter hardy in Nebraska; however, since it propagates so easily, rest assured, I plan to carry my plant indoors for the winter and there I plan to start a whole bunch of little bonfires. Hmm, that might even be more dangerous than having a bonfire on the deck.