

In July, 2009, I wrote about a fire on our deck that had been burning for weeks, and never did we or the neighbors call the fire department. The blaze was not actually a fire; rather, it was an annual bedding plant newly released in the United States for 2009. *Begonia boliviensis* was originally discovered in South America, and the newly released cultivar's name was 'Bonfire'. Earlier that spring, I had accidentally run across this plant at a nursery in Albion, NE. Finding it to be exceptionally attractive, I purchased one. Fascinated with its outstanding performance and beauty, on July 11, 2009, I devoted my column to 'Bonfire'.



'Santa Cruz Sunset' Begonia

The plant, *Begonia boliviensis* 'Bonfire' now has a sibling, *Begonia boliviensis* 'Santa Cruz Sunset', that is collecting an assortment of accolades. This past week I received a press release announcing 'Santa Cruz Sunset' has been selected as the top winner for the 2012 American Garden Award. According to the press release, "*Begonia Santa Cruz Sunset lights up your garden with an abundance of scarlet/orange blooms. Its elegant softly cascading form is perfect for hanging baskets, urns or mass plantings. Surprisingly heat, drought and rain tolerant, this summer beauty thrives in any location from full sun to shade.*"

Each year the National Garden Bureau publishes a list of ornamental plants on which the public can vote to select the winners for the American Garden Award. Selections in past years have included perennials and annuals, but this year only annuals were chosen. Voting remained open until August 31, 2012, and the winning plants were recently announced. To learn more about the winners and how you can get involved in voting for next year's winners, I urge you to log onto their website: <http://www.americangardenaward.org/index.cfm>

From the description and the images I received of 'Santa Cruz Sunset', I actually see little variation from that of 'Bonfire'. One major difference, however, is *Begonia boliviensis* 'Santa Cruz Sunset' can be grown true from seed, unlike *Begonia boliviensis* 'Bonfire' that can only be propagated true to form by either tuber divisions or stem cuttings. Interestingly, although 'Santa Cruz Sunset' can be started from seed, the information I received indicated seed starting can be tricky. Success is better achieved by purchasing transplants. Another major difference between the two is no royalty fees are associated with 'Santa Cruz Sunset' as exist with 'Bonfire'.

I also read an article written by Susan Littlefield of the National Garden Bureau. She wrote, "*If you are looking for a "knock-your-socks-off" plant for a container or hanging basket, look no further than the arching form and dangling, fiery orange bells of Begonia boliviensis 'Santa Cruz Sunset'.*"

Since 2009, Rita and I continue to grow 'Bonfire'. Each year we save the tubers, divide them in the spring and start new plants. Like its new sibling, both begonias create a striking view.

Unlike many begonias, both cultivars thrive in full sun. Both make dramatic statements in containers or hanging baskets. A single plant branches well, forming a mound of dark green leaves covered from spring until frost with vibrant red-orange blossoms. Hundreds of slender, bell-shaped dangling flowers can be found on a single plant. Hardy only to Zone 7, 'Bonfire' and 'Santa Cruz Sunset' must be grown as annuals in Nebraska. Each can be taken indoors and grown as houseplants. Unfortunately, because both cultivars set their flower buds in response to the long days of summer; rarely will they bloom indoors over the winter.



For now, the fire continues to burn brightly on our deck. Although we still won't call the fire department, I have a feeling Jack Frost will soon extinguish the flame. One thing I can assure you, when spring returns in 2013, 'Santa Cruz Sunset' will be burning brightly alongside its older brother, 'Bonfire'.

