photo by Paul Tsamtsis

Begonia 'Punta Gorda'

by Paul Tsamtsis
with Greg Sytch

B. 'Punta Gorda' is a rhizomatous hybrid by Greg Sytch, an ABS member who lives on the west coast of Florida. It is one of those newer category rhizomatous plants that have both spiral and compound or parted leaves. In other words, and as can be seen in the photo, these plants grow up looking like salad bowls.

The plant is named for a small city near Fort Myers. The name is Indian in origin. It is from the same series of crosses that produced such tongue twisters as B. 'Kissimmee' (kiss-a-mee), B. 'Thonotosassa' (though-no-ta-sass-a), B. 'Wimauma' (why-mama), and and B. 'Alafia' (al-a-fy-a), all florida names. Although related to each other, these plants do not all have spiral-compound or spiral-parted leaves.

B. 'Punta Gorda' is beautiful, but not the fastest grower. Its cross was (B. 'Cowardly Lion' x B. *manicata*) X B. *theimei*, *manicata* being a species from Mexico. That, in hybridizer parlance, means that Greg first crossed B. 'Cowardly Lion' x B. *manicata*. He grew those seedlings to blooming size and selected one and crossed that with pollen from B. *theimei*. It's not overnight work, but as can be seen, patience does produce its reward. Greg reports that this cross was done in 1995, a year he did a total of 125 crosses. Of those, only 10 crosses produced anything he found worthy of release to the public, yet another indication that successful hybridizing is not for those who need instant gratification.

B. 'Punta Gorda' enjoys the heat, but detests the excess moisture of Florida, so it has a tendency to drop older leaves quickly, especially during wet periods. The plant pictured is grown by Branch member Morris Mueller, so we will find out if our drier heat is more to this plant's liking. Leaves propagate readily, and it enjoys bright light. Greg reports he grows outdoors almost all year long under a high tree canopy.

Generally, rhizomatous begonias like a 'chunky' mix. It can include medium to large pieces of bark and charcoal mixed in with what we consider our 'regular' mix of various organics like compost, peat, and leaf mold. In another bit of mix information, Rudy Ziesenhenne reported to Branch member Joan Coulat that over time, too much perlite in the mix is not beneficial, as perlite tends to absorb salts, which can really make some rhizomatous-types sulk. So minimize the amount of perlite in trying to achieve that 'chunk' factor.

If you are looking to try a more challenging and really different looking begonia, this or any other of the spiral-parted/compound hybrids out there are worth a try.