



photo by Paul TSAMTSIS

# Begonia 'Torsa'

by Paul Tsamtsis

This begonia is classified as 'tuberous, first-generation hybrid, tall-growing' by the Thompsons. Its flowers are pink and blooms moderately in the late summer and fall. It's parentage is *B. evansiana* X *B. 'Bhotan species'*. *B. evansiana* (= *B. grandis* ssp. *evansiana*) comes from China.

No one locally seems to have ever seen the *B. 'Bhotan species'* parent, but one can assume that *B. 'Torsa'*'s huge leaves come from it. Otherwise it looks pretty much like any of the *B. evansiana* variants as to foliage and flowers.

The leaves on this plant get up to 18 inches across if culturally happy. Leaves of 12 to 14 inches are easily achieved. For perspective, the plant in the accompanying picture is in a 14 inch bulb pan.

This plant grows from a fairly large tuber. Being tuberous, it starts going dormant as the days grow shorter in the early fall. Foliage becomes very prone to mildew at this time, probably part of the process of going dormant. It appears to be nearly as hardy as its familiar parent. During the 'big freezes' my plants of *B. 'Torsa'* survived except for one that had its tuber exposed to the air. It died.

At this time it also starts exhibiting another characteristic of some tuberous species. That is that bulbils start forming in the leaf axils. These are little bulb-looking growths that look similar to the ones some lilies produce. But they are not 'bulbs' in that sense. They are nascent tubers that fall to the soil surface until early spring. Then they sprout easily and form new plants. First year leaves are 6 to 8 inches in size and in the second year achieve their full potential.

Bulbils from *B. 'Torsa'* and other tuberous species can be collected and pressed into the surface of planting mix and kept outside all winter here in Sacramento. Do not put soil over the bulbil as that will guarantee hundred percent failure. They must remain uncovered to germinate in the spring.

There are a few 'sister' type crosses with *B. evansiana* as a parent, but are virtually unknown in cultivation. Julie Vanderwilt of Santa Barbara did a search of the Japanese database and came up with the following list:

- B. 'Blanc'* (tuberous) *pearcei* x *grandis* in 1876 - Froebel
- B. 'Rose Charrier'* (tuberous) *grandis* x *Bertinii* in 1908 - Carrier
- B. 'Lavender Glow'* (rex)  
*grandis* ssp. *evansiana* x rex cv in 1942 - Woodriff
- B. 'Silver Cascade'* (trailing-scandent)  
*grandis* var. *evansiana* x *pustulata* in 1977 - Woodriff
- B. 'Silvermillion'* (shrub)  
*masoniana* x *grandis* ssp. *evansiana* in 1981 - Hixson
- B. 'Ruby'* (rhizome)  
*masoniana* x *grandis* ssp. *evansiana* in 1981 - ?
- B. dipetala* cv. (shrub)  
*dipetala* x *grandis* ssp. *evansiana* in 1981 - Amesbury

Patrick Pons-Worley says that using *B. evansiana* with New World begonias produces weak crosses. Using rexes which are geographically closer to *B. evansiana* produces better plants, but cold hardiness is not passed on. Brad Thompson reports that Chevalier uses *B. discolor* as a synonym for *B. evansiana*.

Standard treatment with anti-fungals help keep *B. 'Torsa'* an eye catching plant in anyone's collection. The only other pest that needs attention is the mealy bug. For growers who like big-leaved plants, this one is a must.

