



*B. heracleifolia* showing new flower stems that will be held very high over the star shaped foliage.



Close-up of new foliage accentuates the hairiness that is typical on stems of both leaves and flowers stems.

photos by Paul Tsamtsis

## *Begonia heracleifolia* Schlechtendal & Camisso

By Morris Mueller

This Mexican rhizomatous species was first described in 1830. Since the type description, numerous varieties and cultivars have been identified and created. The Thompsons in their *Begonias: The Complete Reference Guide* list five varieties of this species. The Japanese Begonia Society Checklist has nine varieties. They are from Mexico or countries further south in Central America.

Through 1989 The Begonian has published seven articles on *B. heracleifolia*, including three on specific varieties. Older publications often refer to this plant as the 'Star Begonia.'

Foliage shows great variability, something confirmed by begonia growers who have seen it growing in its native Mexico. The Thompsons classify all of the varieties as rhizomatous, large-leaved, cleft or parted. Petioles are long, covered with long, thick, tangled hairs. It is reported that in habitat petioles grow to 12 feet! Leaves are comparatively hairless. The one variety with less hair on its petioles is var. *pyramidalis* in which they are ribbed longitudinally along the stem.

Winter blooming, they have clear pink or white flowers in large clusters. Seed sets readily, but pollination is tricky as male pollen must be saved to use on the females which appear well after all

the males have fallen off the cluster. All varieties of *B. heracleifolia* have a rest period that seems independent of any season or calendar. Dormancy is never complete, and they can stare out at you from the light cart without growth for varying periods.

Despite that, culture is very easy. The Thompsons list two as 'For the Beginner' - var. *nigricans* and the cultivar 'Sunderbruchii.' When resting, they should be kept on the dry side. To induce bloom they should receive less light and probably cooler temperatures.

They are suitable plants for hanging containers. In very bright light . . . they tolerate more sun than most other begonias . . . they become more upright. All other elements of culture (fertilizing, planting mix, moisture) are pretty much as that of other begonias in general.

This plant has been used for many hybrids. Helen Krauss listed many in 1947. The number has increased significantly since then. Some of the more widely grown ones include *B. 'Crestaruchii'*, *B. 'Fuscomaculata'*, *B. 'Ricinifolia'* (in its many forms), and *B. 'Suncana'*. These are all rhizomatous. Another hybrid, *B. 'Paul Bruant'* is a thick-stemmed plant. A scan of the John Ingles Memorial Checklist shows at least 38 hybrids with *B. heracleifolia* as either the male or female parent.

