



What is a Begonia?

From the Sacramento Branch and The American Begonia Society

What is a Begonia? The most common Begonia, the one that gardeners see most frequently. Most people know begonias as those plants they see at local retailers (nurseries and home improvement stores, etc.).

So, most people think *Begonia semperflorens* is what a Begonia is, or northern consumers may see tuberous begonias and think that's what a Begonia is.

BUT the Begonia Family - **BEGONIACEAE** (suffix 'ceae' denotes family) - is a LARGE family.

The family Begoniaceae is in the major group Angiosperms (flowering plants). Begoniaceae is a family of flowering plants with over 2,000 species occurring in the subtropics and tropics.

Begoniaceae consists of two genera.

1. **Hillebrandia**, with one species, endemic to only the Hawaii islands.

Hillebrandia sandwicensis is a species of a herbaceous perennial flowering plant native to some of the Hawaiian Islands. Common names include aka 'aka 'awa and pu'a maka nui. It is the only member of the Begoniaceae native to the Hawaiian archipelago (chain of islands). Phylogenetic work supports Hillebrandia as the sister taxon to the rest of the family.

Hillebrandia sandwicensis was named in honor of Dr. William Hillebrand, a German physician and botanist specializing in the Hawaiian flora. In 1850, Hillebrand lived at what is now Foster Botanic Garden in Honolulu. Foster Botanic Garden, Honolulu, Hawaii - started as a private garden (13½ acres) created by German physician-botanist, William Hillebrand and his wife Mary in 1853.

2. And **Begonia**, with over 2,000 species.

Begonia is the 5th largest angiosperm genus in the world. (The genus *Symbegonia* is now included in *Begonia*.) The genus *Begonia* has a pantropical distribution. The family is distributed throughout most tropical and warm temperate regions, with a large percentage of species being native to Mexico and Latin America. No species is native to the United States.

The begonia genus was named by French botanist Charles Plumier for Michel Bégon, governor of Santa Domingo (now Haiti) and a patron of botany (as well as a passionate plant collector).

Begonia identification

The general habit of a plant provides a useful means of narrowing down a species' identity. But even in this there are lots of different ways of breaking it down. Horticulturists divide begonias into 3 groups based on rootstock, others add herbaceous or shrub-like. In Europe they acknowledge five types, and the ABS acknowledges eight types, but even then with some new types emerging. So all these different definitions are valid in their own ways, but it can be very confusing. Even now with all the discoveries of new species in SE Asia, the new plants challenge our understanding of tuberous, and rhizomatous.

Horticulturists	European	ABS
Fibrous-rooted Includes: Cane, shrub, and semperflorens.	Elatior (×hiemalis)	Cane-like (angelwing) Includes: superba and mallet types.
Tuberous Rooted Includes: semi-tuberous, ×hiemalis, ×cheimantha and ×tuberhybrida.	Lorraine (×cheimantha)	Rex (painted leaf) Includes: only those with <i>B. rex</i> heritage, but....
Rhizomatous Includes: rex.	Semperflorens-cultorum	Rhizomatous Includes: upright, jointed stem.
	Tuberous Includes: semi-tuberous, and ×tuberhybrida.	Shrub-like
	Foliage Includes: cane-like, shrub-like, rex and rhizomatous.	Thick-stemmed
		Trailing-Scandent
		Semperflorens (wax leaf) Includes: Dragon Wing.
		Tuberous Includes: semi-tuberous, ×hiemalis, ×cheimantha and ×tuberhybrida.

<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Cane-like are sub-divided by: <ol style="list-style-type: none"> A. Superba-type B. Mallet type 2. Rex - Rex are subdivided by leaf size: <ol style="list-style-type: none"> A. Small-leaved - (under 3" at maturity) B. Medium-leaved - (3"-6" at maturity) C. Large-leaved - (over 6" at maturity) D. Upright-jointed stemmed 3. Rhizomatous - sub-divided by leaf size: <ol style="list-style-type: none"> A. Small-leaved - (under 3" at maturity) B. Medium-leaved - (3"-6" at maturity) C. Large-leaved - (6-12" at maturity) D. Giant-leaved - (over 12" at maturity) E. Leaf shapes <ol style="list-style-type: none"> i. Compound - a leaf having two or more leaflets. 4. Semperflorens are sub-divided by <ol style="list-style-type: none"> A. cucullata-type B. schmidtiana-type C. Cultivars are sub-divided by <ol style="list-style-type: none"> i. Single-flowered ii. Semi-double or double flowered iii. Variegated foliage 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 5. Shrub-like are divided by <ol style="list-style-type: none"> A. Bare-leaved B. Hairy-leaved C. Distinctive foliage (Unusual surface and/or coloring; Listida-like type; compact-type) 6. Trailing-Scandent are divided into: <ol style="list-style-type: none"> A. Trailing B. Scandent 7. Thick-stemmed are divided by <ol style="list-style-type: none"> A. Bare-leaved B. Hairy-leaved C. Trunk-like D. Thickset 8. Tuberous are divided by: <ol style="list-style-type: none"> A. Semi-tuberous species B. Tuberous, Species and first generation hybrids C. Semi-tuberous hybrids <ol style="list-style-type: none"> i. xhiemalis and xhiemalis-like ii. xchiemantha and xchiemantha-like D. Bulbous E. xTuberhybrida
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With such diversity, what exactly is a begonia?

Begonia KEY Characteristics: Visual identification is mainly from the flowers and the leaves.

1. Begonia blooms are unisexual (dioecious). Blooms are either male or female.
2. Begonia blooms have tepals. The flowers are quite distinctive, with two opposite sepals much larger than the pair of such smaller petals, borne at right angles to the sepals.
3. Begonias are monoecious. Plants which have separate male and female flowers on the same plant. With few exceptions, begonias have separate male and female flowers on the same plant, although male and female blooms may open at different times.
4. Begonia blooms have inferior ovaries. An ovary embedded within a flower, below the other flower parts. Female flowers have a winged ovary behind their tepals. It usually has 3 wings.
5. Begonia leaves are most often alternate. (Leaves that occur one at a time on alternating sides of the stem.)
6. Begonia leaves are usually asymmetrical. (unequal-sided)
7. Begonia leaves emerge from stipules. An appendage found at the base of a leaf where it joins a branch or stem.
8. Begonias are herbs. There are usually distinct nodes (bumps) on the stem.
9. Most begonias are perennial in their native location.
10. Begonia seeds are unique. The seeds of Begonia are unique in the plant kingdom, since they possess a ring of collar cells between a seed lid and the remainder of the testa cells. Begonia seeds are among the smallest in the plant kingdom.

Exceptions: Nonetheless, some species do not exhibit any of these features and can only be identified as begonias by a combination of subtle botanical characteristics.