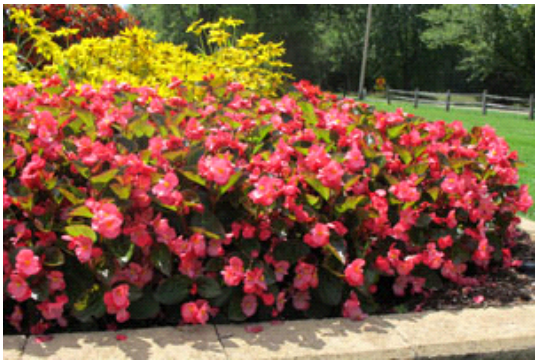
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Features

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Behind the Variety: A BIG Display of Color

Katie Elzer-Peters



Benary has been breeding and releasing begonias for more than 100 years. In 2009, the 100-year anniversary of their first release, they introduced the Begonia BIG series. The plants were the result of an ongoing breeding program.

“We were trying to create an easy-growing begonia that was more vigorous, with larger flowers and easier to grow than what was currently on the market,” says Jen Calhoun, Marketing Specialist for Benary North America. “And honestly, we didn’t realize what a special plant we had until just recently.”

They clued into the extreme utility when orders started pouring in from all over the country, en masse and with frequency.

“We had people contacting us from Florida and Texas and the United Kingdom—from all over saying ‘They work great here.’ It was thriving in some really tough environments.” BIG is in some pretty high-profile places, too. “Benary found out when, during the second year the bed was planted, the grower called and asked, ‘Do you guys realize there are BIG Begonias in the landscape bed in front of the White House?’” said Jen.

The variety really took off when Kathy Fish of K.Fish Color, a plant broker in the Chicago area, encouraged landscaper Christy Webber to plant huge beds of it at O’Hare and Midway airports. Kathy says that BIG Begonias are her No. 1 seller because you can grow them everywhere.

“Plant ’em in the sun; plant ’em in the shade. They’re hardy annual plants that seem to succeed every single year,” Kathy says. “I’m not a born salesman, but I believe in what I sell and BIGs are it!”

“They’re easy,” is what Jen kept coming back to during our discussion. “Once they’re established they don’t need a lot of maintenance. The blooms form a ball of color around the whole plant and they don’t require deadheading.” Because the plants grow equally well in full hot sun or shade, they’re great for tricky

commercial spots, like next to office buildings that throw off a lot of heat and reflected light, but can also cast deep shade for part of the day. “Growers love them because they can use the same timing for all plants in the series, regardless of leaf color,” Jen adds.

Landscapers are firmly convinced that BIG Begonias are the bee’s knees, so Benary has turned its attention to the consumer market, guiding the consumers to make a choice they know will make those gardeners happy. The challenge is that the true benefits of BIG aren’t apparent when the plant is on the retail bench (unless it’s in a large pot). “They’re a real showpiece in 36-in. containers,” Jen says. Those large pots still don’t communicate the “bulletproof” nature of the plants, though.

To help retailers reach consumers, Benary has created entirely new POP materials and a new magazine, even. “We call it the ‘Do it BIG’ magazine and it gives retailers all kinds of consumer copy and print-ready pieces they can put into newsletters and marketing materials.” From cocktail recipes to planting instructions, craft projects to growing tips, the little magazine has big ideas that are rare to see coming from breeders. Turns out old dogs can learn new tricks.

To grow or sell BIG Begonias, contact your plant broker. They’re widely sold as plugs and pelleted seed. **GP**

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