


A SHORT BOTANICAL HISTORY



The "Indiana Jones" of Colonial Great Britain were clearly the expeditionary botanists and plant collectors. We all remember Charles Darwin's visit to Australia with Capt. James Cook, but there were many others.

The first begonia was discovered in 1650 by Francisco Hernandez and the plant family was named after Michel

Begon (1638 - 1710) a french colonial administrator and patron of botany.

It was Englishman Richard Pearce that discovered the original tuberous species in Peru, Bolivia and Chile in 1864 in the high Andean rainforests, at altitudes in excess of 3,000m. These non-descript plants with dainty red, yellow, white and pink flowers not bigger than 7 cm have been used to breed all the flowering monsters we have today. These early species were Begonia boliviensis, veitchii, cinnabarina and roseaflora.

Begonias are found on all continents excluding Europe and Australia. They are predominantly rainforest plants, and their survival is now at great risk. New species continue to be discovered, the city has a number so recent that they have yet to be named. Who knows what beauty has yet to be discovered or alternatively lost by our modern gold seekers, searching for their wealth in the worlds tropical rainforests, just as our gold seekers did in Ballarat in the 1860's. The price of human endeavour some may say, but should wealth be extracted at such a price?

BEGONIA SOCIETIES

There are active Societies in most Australian states dedicated to Begonia growing. They are interested in all types of begonias including the tuberous type grown by the City of Ballaarat.

The Victorian Begonia Society Inc.

Secretary - Margaret Wright
74 Railway Place
MACEDON, VIC. 3440

The N.S.W. Begonia Society Inc.

Secretary - Mrs Jean Whitten
15 Carlo Close
KINCUMBER, N.S.W. 2251

The Begonia Society of Western Australia Inc.

Secretary - Mr Stewart Silvester
34 Waterton Way
COOLOONGUP, W.A. 6168

The Queensland Begonia Society Inc.

Secretary - Mr Peter Henderson
79 Chuter Street
Stafford North
BRISBANE, QLD. 4053

The South Australian Begonia Society

Secretary - Mr Kevin Handreck
2 Birdwood Street
NETHERBY, S.A. 5062

INTERNATIONAL

Association of Australian Begonia Societies

c/- City of Ballaarat
P.O. Box 655
BALLARAT VIC. 3353




BALLARAT'S BEGONIAS



The City of Ballaarat

J9C F16 059

OUR GOLDEN PAST



Ballarat and its Begonias are now synonymous. Our "Golden Past" certainly gave the wealth and time to appreciate the finer things in life to our residents. James Esmond's discovery of Gold at Clunes and at Ballarat in 1853 turned a newly settled pristine grazing region into a tumultuous pot of humanity, seeking wealth and fortune and scarring a verdant wilderness into a barren moonscape of man made craters.

But our "New Australians" from England, Ireland, the Americas, Europe and Asia sought not only the wealth that gold brings, and surely it did, but a new life in a new country. From the anguish of the Eureka Rebellion they sought the social justice we enjoy today as proud Australians. They also set about the building of a majestic city, a Ballarat to reflect both their monetary wealth and their wealth of spirit. Private wealth was lavished on public enterprise, our imposing architecture and of course, our gardens and parklands.

BEGONIAS THE BEGINNING

The Botanic Gardens were conceived by a design competition in 1858. Construction commenced immediately and continues today. The display of plant collections is always a feature of gardens botanical. Ballarat was not alone but started to specialise in "horticultural" collections such as roses, camellias, chrysanthemums and geraniums. Not for Ballarat the preservation of wild plants for solemn botanical study (like most Botanic Gardens). Better to collect and display the work of plant hybrids devoted to the development of garden varieties possessing usually much larger flowers than the wild parents from which they were bred. The plant collections were housed in various glasshouses in the nursery and a spectacular fernery that once stood on the spot of our current one.

Most of the new plant varieties were imported from

England, at that time the mecca of plant breeding, all things botanical and horticultural. So it was with our Tuberous Begonias. The first official record from the Curators log book of the 28th, September 1989 where it was casually written that they "potted up tuberous begonias".

THE ENGLISH CONNECTION - BLACKMORE and LANGDON.

Charles Frederick Langdon (1868 - 1947) Head gardener to the wealthy vicar of Newton St Loe (near Bath), formed a magic alliance with engineer cum Innkeeper, entrepreneur and amateur gardener, James Barrett Blackmore in 1900, to form the partnership - Blackmore and Langdon Nursery. Langdon supplied the plant breeding skills, Blackmore the money by the sale of his inn.

They were both obsessed by the flowers of tuberous begonia and set about to quickly establish themselves as the breeders of the finest new hybrids in the world. They were patronised by the wealthy estates seeking perfection and later by American millionaires who wanted nothing but the best. The firm continues today in the ownership of grandson John Langdon with his three sons being trained "in the business".

The earliest discovered sale to the City of Ballarat from Blackmore and Langdon was 1903. There may have been earlier sales but the records 1900 to 1902 were lost in bombing raids during World War II. The City has been importing new varieties from Blackmore and Langdon each year to the present day. So what you see on display is the product of the skill of plant hybridists Charles Langdon, his son Stephen Langdon and his son John Langdon.

No doubt the city was importing from earlier hybridists, mainly in Belgium and Germany, but no records exist today. Obviously Blackmore and Langdon dominate now as the only commercial nursery in the world devoted to the breeding of these large "exhibition hybrids".

THE NAMES THE PERSONALITIES.

For the marketing of all products one needs a name that conveys the spirit. So does the task also fall to plant breeders who name their varieties and inspire customers.

So it is with tuberous begonias. "Scarlet O'Hara", the brilliant red flower reflecting the shimmering tresses of that fictional and fickle Southern Belle (no there are no "Frankly I don't give a damn hybrids"!).

"Falstaff" the humorous rose pink of Shakespeares famous character. "Midas" who's gold flowers are reminiscent of the Legendary King of Phrygia whose touch turned everything to gold. "Hawaii" the rich orange/apricot of a tropical sunset. How many more can you find on display?

There are also varieties of the names Langdon, showing the breeders indulgence and love of wives (Billie Langdon), sons (Alan Langdon, John Langdon) and friends. Many friends have also been found in Ballarat for the Langdon family.

TB TOOP - Botanical Gardens Curator from 1914 to 1945 and the father of our Begonia tradition.

T. C. BEAUMONT - The doyen of Ballarat's Botanic Gardens Curators (1947 to 1978). Hand picked by Tom Toop since his recruitment as a "Lad gardener" in 1924 (yes 54 years service!) Tom Beaumont, to this day is acknowledged as the worlds greatest tuberous begonia grower. His skills gave us our fame, inspired the Begonia Festival in 1953 and his spirit lives with the staff today. A British Empire Medal and Order of Australia attest to the communities undying admiration.

KEN McDONALD - President of the Ballarat Horticultural Society, friend of Tom Beaumont and dedicated amateur begonia grower.

CAROL WILKINS - Late wife of retired Festival Director Barry Wilkins and a former Queen of Begonias. Her beauty and dedication is reflected in the perfect apricot flower.

CITY OF BALLAARAT - The bright orange hybrid is acknowledged as one of the best on English flower show benches. A love affair between breeder Stephen Langdon and his far flung "empire".

So please enjoy our flowers, not only for their intrinsic beauty but for the spirit of dedication and excellence they represent.

