

## Semperfloren Begonias and Whoppers

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Quite often at this time of the year we don't have to emphasize planting semperfloren (wax) begonias because so many survive the winter. In 2016-2017 the freezing temperatures were low enough and lasted long enough, however, that even the semperfloren begonias froze completely.

Wax begonias are desirable because they are showy and prosper in the shade. If you plant them in March and early April so they can be established before it becomes too hot, they will often survive sunny locations.

Most selections of wax begonias grow to about 12 inches tall and equally wide. They have nickel size flowers of pink, red, or white. The foliage is at least as decorative as the blooms. Foliage colors include light green and maroon-green. All the leaves are shiny and waxy as you might expect.

The long-lived annuals are relatively drought tolerant. You can tell when they need water because the foliage color fades when they are dry. Both because of their attractiveness and drought tolerance, wax begonias are outstanding container plants. Use them in whiskey barrels or small containers and hanging baskets.

Insects do not seem to bother semperfloren begonias but slugs and snails sometimes feed on the foliage. Use slug and snail bait to prevent damage. One issue I have with begonias is that the stems are brittle and can break if squirrels visit their containers or active pets cut through the flower beds.

Last year the nursery trade introduced the "Whopper" begonia to Texas markets. The name is weird but the plant is remarkable. Plant breeders have incorporated all of the good characteristics of the semperfloren begonia into a selection that grows 2 to 3 times as large. The leaves are as large as beagle ears and the flowers are quarter size. In 2016 plants were available with pink or red flowers and the leaves were either green or maroon-green. The "Whopper" begonia was designated as a Texas Superstar in 2016 and deserved the recognition. Watch for the "Whopper" this spring and try it in a large container such as a half-whiskey barrel, or grow it in a shady flower bed.

Gardeners with snapdragons in their flower beds are experiencing the spring bloom period. They should be showy at least until the end of April. Dianthus are also blooming, and if you were lucky enough to have some of your sweet pea plants survive the freezes in January, they are also beginning to bloom. Support the cool weather annuals with one last application of a slow release lawn fertilizer such as 19-5-9 and an application of slug and snail bait.

Many roses are also blooming. Among those that are most noticeable in my neighborhood are Knockout, Butterfly rose, Belinda's Dream, Carefree Beauty (Katy Road), Mrs. Dudley Cross, Grandma's Yellow, and Old Blush climbing rose. The Lady Banksia rose has already finished its short bloom period. The old-fashioned and tough modern roses (such as those above) seem to be able to prosper and bloom without fungicides and insecticide sprays but if you have some of the fancier hybrid teas you should institute a regular spray program.

Other plants that are blooming now include larkspur, Mexican plum, anaqua, blue curl (Phacelia), pomegranate, dayflower, horseherb, wisteria, cross vine and pyracantha. Redbud and Texas mountain laurel have just completed their bloom period.