GROWERTALKS

Guest Column

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Hula: The Wide-Bodied Wax Begonia

Lowell Halvorson



“Spreading” is one of those rubber words capable of stretching across different products. Spreading in a petunia is not like spreading in a pansy or in a begonia … (record scratch) … wait. Wax begonias are shaped like gum drops or corn muffins—how exactly do they spread?

Width is the significant feature here. According to the Dutch breeders at PanAmerican, the Hula crown grows outward more than upward. It branches laterally. As it rises, the crown sends out even more lateral branches on top of the layer underneath it. This results in lots of strength to hold its shape internally and lots of end tips for the frothy wax begonia flowers.

Pictured: The most surprising feature is the Toasting of the Reds. The Hulas are sold as a green leaf series, and they ship that way from the greenhouse, however, leave a basket of Red in the sun and the foliage turns bronzy.

The technique creates an arching basket-shaped habit. A Hula might have the height of a Super Olympia, but it covers the growing media with the girth of a MegaWatt. In dimensions, that’s about 8- to 10-in. high and about 20- to 26-in. wide. Instead of corn muffins, Hulas look more like apple fritters when viewed from the side: high centers sloping to thick, well-defined edges.

Bringing premium to begonia baskets

Hula’s shining moments come as inputs to containers with large diameters, from 14 in. up to 20 in. These plants bring strength along with their beauty. Think of Cultivate. Do you want your outdoor containers, surrounded by a sea of hot concrete, flagging in front of this audience? I see begonias in the urns all the time.

In July, 4:00 p.m. brings hydration issues. Super humid air encourages disease. High nighttime temperatures mess with flower formation. Hulas shrug all this off while covering the media underneath. Lots of commercial venues need this kind of iron-clad beauty: zoos, parks, hotels, stadiums, plazas and so forth.

Hulas function as filler in mixed containers. The inputs bulk up with extra material to hang over the edges, but the canopy is open enough to allow salvias to rise, ipomoeas to chill or dichondras to hang. Hulas lend their internal strength as a scaffold to support other material. Just for the record, all wax begonias can do this, but Hulas look

good in a basket while doing it.

Some of the best examples of Hula baskets can be found in the photography from the Raker Trial Gardens. These are big overhanging baskets with the classic wax begonia look. Tap through the dates and you can see the product's ability to last into autumn. Part of a premium promise is the ability to last longer than a few weeks.

Hula also has begonia's knack for lasting all season in flower. Wax begonias don't really notice the mishandling after sale, the widely variable watering schedule, or the full sun or full shade where they're placed. These are premium basket features that Hula supplies by its very nature. The difference? Hulas look effortless in a basket, like they belong.

A very young series

Over the decades, waxes have built up assumptions around their relentless sameness. Hulas are too young for that; they've worked the industry for only three years, so they have quirks.

Toasting the Red: Technically, Hula is strictly a green-leaf series—no bronze is sold. If you grow the plants in a greenhouse, this is true; however, if you set a basket of Red outside and let it toast in the full sun (like you would Vertigo, Black Pearl or Caramel), the foliage develops that rich bronzy begonia glow. White doesn't do this; Pink does this a little, but the Red loves a good tan. For green and bronze foliage contrast, opt for the mix.

White is new this year: In previous years, Blush was the lightest choice. Blush is nearly white, but it has faint stains of pink on the backs of the flowers. White is fully white, both sides, but Blush remains in the lineup.

Color coverage and vigor: Hula colors still have their personalities—the nature of each one is slightly different in the vigor of the plant, the density of floral coverage over the top or the neatness around the natural shag of its shape. Testing one color shows about 95% of what the other ones will do.

Daylight neutral: Some waxes are, some are not. Hulas don't depend on daylength to trigger their flowers. If you want to push begonia blooms earlier into the calendar, but your current series struggles to open up, Hulas could work as a solution.

Bicolor Red & White/Red & White Mix: Bicolor offers flowers of red and white—no pinks here. Mix offers two plants, one red and one white. The two colors are exactly the same, so it sets up an interesting contrast. Which is better? The answer comes down to color size. If you like your chocolate in little sprinkles, go with the bicolor. If you like your color in fudgy chunks, go with the mix. **GT**

Lowell Halvorson is a consultant and writer in Fairfield, Connecticut, for retail and wholesale horticulture, specializing in business development. He also covers the breeding community for GrowerTalks *magazine. You can contact him at (203) 257-9345 or halvorson@triadicon.com.*