



Eric Hofley / Michigan Gardener

Traditional wax-leaf begonias

# Impatiens

## ALTERNATIVES

A new disease has swept across the country and promises to change the way many of us will garden this year. *Impatiens downy mildew* has found a way to dethrone the most popular bedding plant in the U.S. Downy mildew first appeared in England around the beginning of the 21st century. It showed up in California in 2004 and limited areas of the South in 2009. Here in Michigan in 2012, impatiens that were thriving one week were defoliated and nearly dead a week later.

George  
Papadelis

Regular, seed-grown impatiens (*Impatiens walleriana*) are the victims of this rampant disease. In the early phase, the leaves yellow and curl. If you turn the leaves over, you will clearly see the downy mildew (white powdery spores) on the underside. In the late phase, plants completely defoliate within a couple weeks.

The disease produces spores that can move in the air and overwinter in the soil. Even if you didn't have downy mildew last year, it is very likely that you will have it this year.

Growers can apply specialized fungicides that will protect impatiens for up to 6 weeks, but there is no cure once the plants are infected. It is unpractical for the home gardener to try treat-

ing the disease since these chemicals need to be applied frequently by a certified applicator.

Many commercial growers have chosen not to offer regular or double impatiens (*Impatiens walleriana*) this season. The good news is that we have so many great alternatives, including New Guinea impatiens (*Impatiens hawkeri*), that can perform beautifully where we used to grow regular impatiens.

We will discuss many alternatives in this special **three-part series**. Explore the second part below and you'll see that this disease has created an opportunity for gardeners to try several interesting and potentially rewarding candidates.



Benary

'Big Rose with Bronze Leaf' begonia from the 'Big' series



Ball Horticultural Co.

'Whopper Rose Bronze Leaf' begonia from the 'Whopper' series



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Dragon Wing begonia

### PART 2 OF 3

#### Begonias

**Traditional wax-leaf begonias** are available everywhere and offer an inexpensive alternative for either sun or shade. Choose from bronze or green foliage and standard colors of red, white, light pink, dark pink (rose), or mixed. Both foliage colors will tolerate full sun as long as the foliage remains dry when the sun is shining. Green-leafed varieties (except those with white flowers) will develop a pink/red tint when exposed to full sun. They typically grow 8 to 12 inches tall. Wax-leaf begonias require no deadheading and thrive with minimal watering.

**Dragon Wing begonias** have been around since the late 1990s. True Dragon Wing begonias are only available in red and pink. Their unique arching, semi-pendulous habit makes them ideal for hanging baskets, large containers, or beds. Use these in shade to part shade where plants will flower effortlessly with minimal care. They can grow 12 to 15 inches tall and 15 to 18 inches wide. They are seed-grown and should be available in 4- to 6-inch pots and sometimes 18-count flats.

**Wax-leaf begonia hybrids.** These have become very popular the past several years with the introduction of several outstanding

varieties. The 'Big' series boasts flowers up to 3 inches across! There are 3 varieties: 'Big Red with Green Leaf,' 'Big Red with Bronze Leaf,' and 'Big Rose with Bronze Leaf.' They can grow over 2 feet tall and perform beautifully like the traditional wax-leafed begonias.

A newcomer on the garden scene is the 'Whopper' series. It will grow almost 3 feet tall and 22 inches wide. It also has 3-inch, red or pink flowers and comes with a bronze or green leaf. There is also a little-known series of double-flowering, wax-leafed begonias called 'Fairytale.' The mostly double flowers are held well above the green leaves and come in red, pink, white, coral picotee, and mixed. This series is seed-grown and may be available in flats.

**Tuberous begonias.** Tuberous begonias that are grown from tubers are still available, but cost and availability has made them less and less popular. Most tuberous begonias sold today are grown from seed. The most popular seed-grown series is the 'Nonstop' begonia. It is an upright grower with large, double flowers and green leaves. The color range includes yellow, orange, pink, rose, salmon, red, white,

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Illumination 'Scarlet' begonia

Proven Winners



Illumination 'Peaches & Cream' begonia

Benary



Illumination 'Golden Picotee' begonia

Benary



Nonstop 'Mix' begonia

Proven Winners



Nonstop 'Mocca White'

Proven Winners



Bonfire begonia

Tesselaar Plants

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appleblossom, and several others. They are extra happy in a well-drained potting soil but will also grow in the ground in beds. There is a bronze-leaved series called 'Mocca' that is identical to the 'Nonstops' except for its darker, brownish foliage. For a trailing series, try 'Illumination,' whose mostly double flowers cascade from arching plants. These are perfect for hanging baskets or containers—alone or in combination with other shade lovers. There are many individual colors and some exceptional bicolor varieties such as 'Peaches & Cream' and 'Golden Picotee.' Keep the soil slightly moist and fertilize through the summer.

**Begonia boliviensis.** During the last several years, begonia breeding has produced several outstanding cultivars whose lineage originates from the Bolivian begonia. Most of these are trailing, may have single to fully double flowers, and usually thrive in either shade or full sun. 'Bonfire,' with its single orange flowers, was the first Bolivian begonia to become popular. We now have the 'Waterfall' series, whose more attractive foliage, single to double flowers, and broad color range has made this the most popular series in the U.S. Look for other great-performing Bolivian begonia series such as 'Sparkler,' 'Bon Bon,' 'Million Kisses,' 'Beaucoup,' and 'Crackling Fire.'

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Waterfall 'Encanto Falls Orange' begonia

Beekenkamp Plants





Ball Horticultural Co.

'Kauai Burgundy' torenia



Ball Horticultural Co.

'Kauai Rose' torenia



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Today's vincas have overlapping petals and extra large flowers that strongly resemble impatiens.

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**Lobelia** is available in seed-grown flats or vegetatively-grown pots. The seed-grown varieties decline rapidly as temperatures increase. By summer they are usually quite brown and inevitably discarded. However, the vegetatively-grown varieties have much better heat tolerance, especially when protected from midday sun. They have a mounding to trailing habit and come in shades of blue, white, and pink. The most heat-tolerant ones are the 'Hot' series and the 'Techno' series. Being that they are not grown from seed, they are significantly more expensive than impatiens.

**Wishbone flower (Torenia)** is available in seed-grown flats or vegetatively-grown pots. The seed-grown varieties include a relatively new series called 'Kauai,' whose performance in numerous field trials has been exceptional. This series offers more compact plants with superior branching in seven colors and a mixture. Choose from pinks, purples, blues, and whites. They form tight mounds 8 to 10 inches tall and wide that thrive in shade or partial shade.

The vegetatively-propagated cultivars come in similar colors and thrive in shade to nearly full sun. The big difference is that

these torenia have a trailing habit. They are great in hanging baskets or as a groundcover. They look great planted under red or pink Dragon Wing begonias.

**Vinca (periwinkle).** Where some sun is available, this seed-grown bedding plant will thrive. As little as four hours of full sun will sustain good growth; even unobstructed northern exposure will suffice. Vincas prefer acidic, well-drained soil that's high in organic matter. They also prefer to be grown warm, so planting them too early in the spring could prove detrimental. They have a mounding growth habit and come in a broad range of colors. Today's varieties have overlapping petals and extra large flowers that strongly resemble impatiens. Where enough light is available, this is an economically practical impatiens alternative.

*George Papadelis is the owner of Telly's Greenhouse in Troy, MI.*

*Editor's note: Part 1 of "Impatiens Alternatives" appeared in the April 2013 issue (page 14). That issue can be seen on our website (MichiganGardener.com) by clicking on "E-Edition." Stay tuned for Part 3 of "Impatiens Alternatives" in the June 2013 issue.*



'Hot Blue with Eye' lobelia

Westhoff