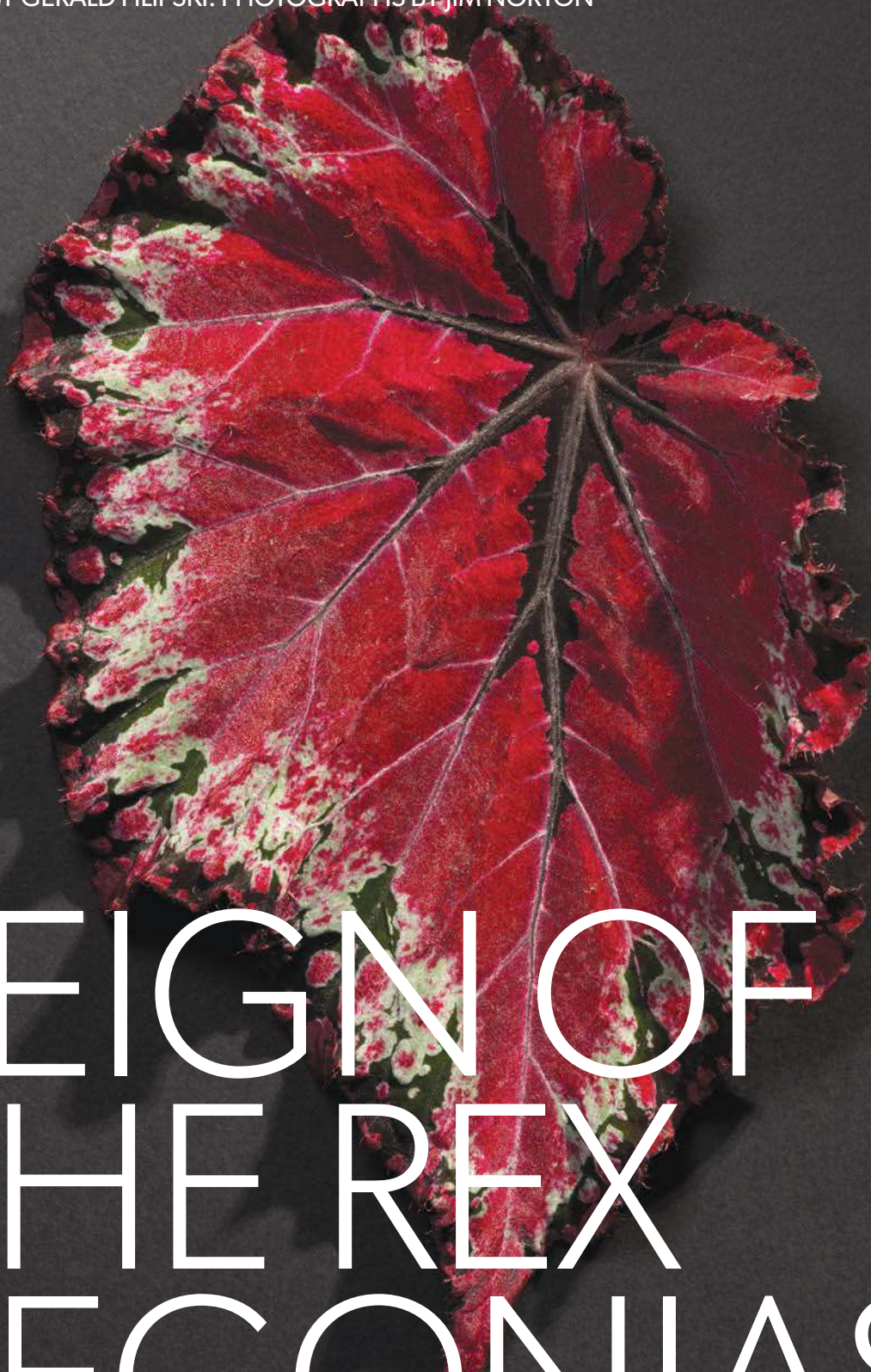


THE DESIGN ISSUE

Add pizzazz to your containers with the rex begonia's fancy foliage. BY GERALD FILIPSKI. PHOTOGRAPHS BY JIM NORTON



REIGN OF THE REX BEGONIAS



WHEN GARDENERS THINK OF BEGONIAS, images of typical wax begonias stuck in a forgotten shady corner of the garden usually come to mind. But the Victorians knew how to appreciate a begonia, likely because they favoured *Begonia rex* species imported from India, which had unusual leaf colours and textures. Today, advances in breeding have taken these Victorian favourites to new levels with intricate forms and patterns, and their popularity is on the rise once more.

Opposite: 'Stained Glass' begonia features ruby red leaves edged with shades of green.

Above: Likely 'Her Majesty', a popular cultivar with a slight curl in the centre.



REX BEGONIAS, a rhizomatous type of begonia, can transform an overlooked semi-shaded spot into a beautiful focal point thanks to their eye-catching leaves. Ranging from bicoloured silver to burgundy, black and green, often with black, brown and red markings for added detail, the foliage can be heavily textured, serrated, crimped or pebbled; some leaves even twist around at the base, resembling the curvy shell of a snail. Although not usually grown for their flowers, these plants can also put on a spectacular display during their short blooming period.

Above: An intricately marked type of escargot begonia called 'China Girl'.

Opposite: The silvery sheen of this unnamed escargot type glows in the shade.

STARS OF THE SHADE GARDEN

Rex begonias are often thought of as houseplants, but they perform well outdoors in summer in full or semi-shade, and are especially suited to containers, where their fancy foliage can shine. Their average size is 12 to 18 inches (30 to 45 cm) tall and wide.

A tiered collection of several potted varieties would create a wow effect in a shaded corner, or simply glow in the filtered light under a large



shade tree. Set them off with a plain backdrop, such as tall ferns or a cedar hedge. Although they can steal the show on their own, silver-and-burgundy patterned varieties mixed with deep pink impatiens and white lobelia in a large container makes a stunning combination.

If you're moving potted rex begonias to a location where they can be enjoyed during a garden party or barbecue, make sure not to leave them in the sun

for long periods of time to avoid bleaching their leaves.

GROWING AND OVERWINTERING

Use a good-quality potting soil that drains well. Rex begonias don't like to be overwatered or to have wet feet. During their active growing period, which is spring through fall, let the soil nearly dry out before watering. To check the moisture level, insert your index finger into the soil up to the second knuckle. If the soil feels dry, it's time to water.

Feed plants every two weeks, but only when they're actively growing. Use a complete fertilizer

DID YOU KNOW?

"Rhizomatous" means that the plant grows from a thickened stem structure known as a rhizome.



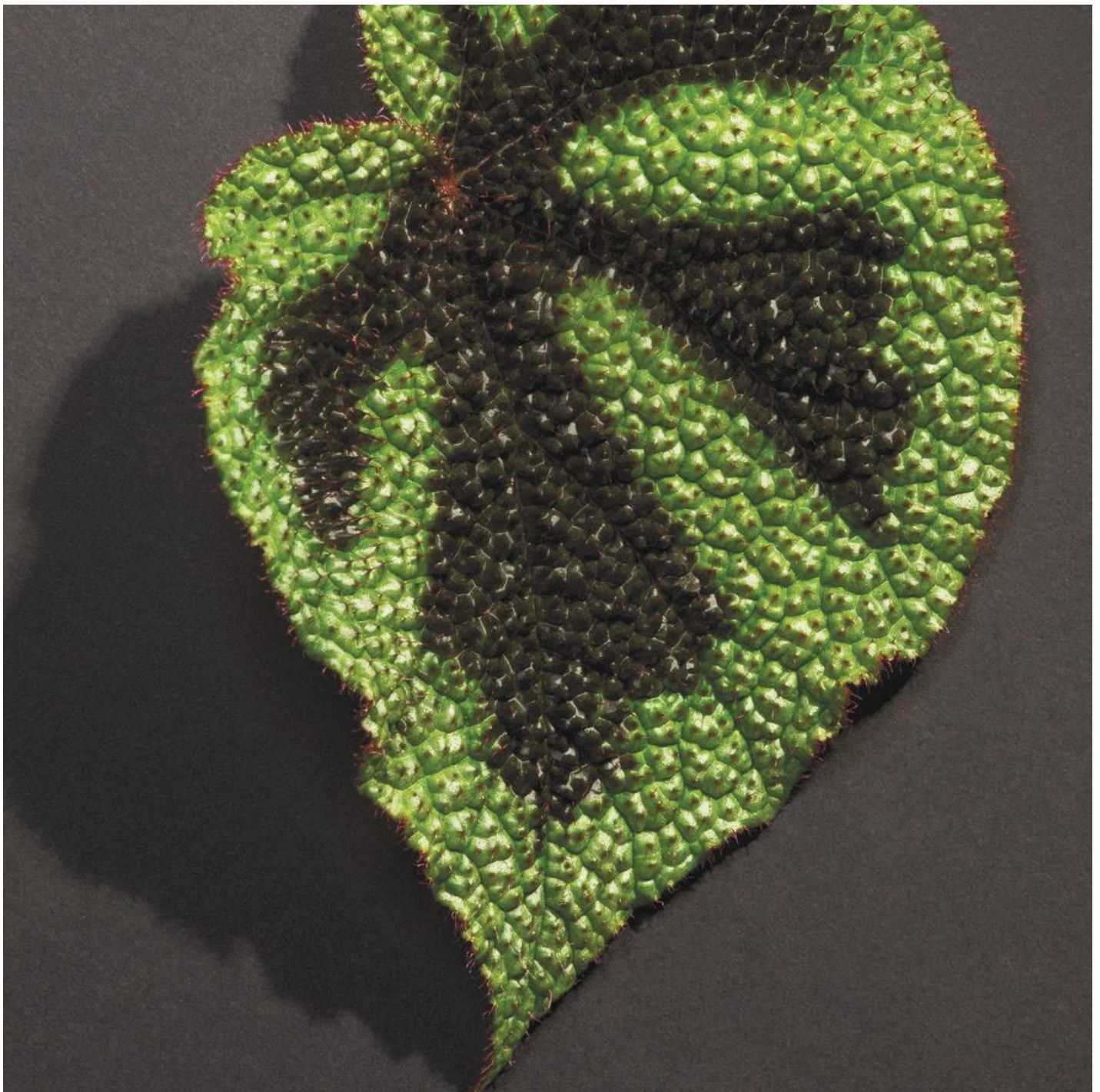
An unnamed fancy-leaf begonia cultivar with palmate-shaped foliage.

(one that contains nitrogen, phosphorus and potassium) such as 15-30-15.

These plants don't tolerate cold and will need to be brought indoors before the first fall frost. While they tolerate warmer temperatures outdoors, indoors they prefer temperatures between 14°C and 22°C. A location with bright filtered light is best. Continue to keep soil lightly moist and never over-water. An added bonus to overwintering plants indoors is that many will display flowers in airy clusters on stems high above the leaves in late winter or early spring.

Rex begonias prefer high humidity, not always found in homes during the winter. To increase humidity around overwintering plants, fill a shallow tray with a layer of pebbles and place the pots on top. Add water to the tray until it's just below the bottom of the pots.

When grown outdoors, plants can be prone to bacterial leaf spot, powdery mildew and other fungal diseases. Provide good air circulation to



help avoid these problems. Pests that may be bothersome include aphids and mealy bugs. When grown indoors, begonias experience few pests and diseases, but be sure to check plants carefully when moving plants indoors for overwintering.

If a plant begins to get lanky, pinch out the growing tips to produce a more rounded plant. If it begins to grow up and over the edge of the container, cut off the rhizome and insert the bottom inch (2.5 cm) in a small pot filled with damp sand or perlite to root a new plant. Another way to propagate new plants is to take leaf cuttings.

Begonia masoniana is often referred to as the iron cross begonia. Its thick leaves have a pebbly surface.



FOR SOURCES,
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