



photo by Paul Tsamtsis

Begonia rajah Ridley

by Morris Mueller

Begonia rajah was first published over 100 years ago by Henry Ridley in 1894 after having been discovered in 1892 by a native collector on the Malaysian peninsula. The Thompson's in their book ***BEGONIAS: The Complete Reference Guide*** classify it as "rhizomatous, distinctive foliage, unusual surface and/or unusual coloring, medium-leaved." In terms of growing ease, they classify it as for the collector.

Helen Krauss further describes it as having foliage which is "broad, ovate, acuminate, paper-thin, smooth, green and brown mottled." The plant pictured has slightly pustulated leaves. It was rediscovered in the wild by Dr. Ruth Kiew and reported about in a 1989 issue of *the Begonian*.

Culturally, it must be grown in a terrarium. For me it is a survivor, but will not tolerate going completely dry. Lower light seems to bring out better color, larger leaves, and a greater number of flower stems with small pink flowers. I have grown it for years in a

plastic pot inside an aquarium using my regular mix (4 parts potting soil, 1 part perlite, and 1 part oak leaf mold). It has seldom had pests, the most usual being earthworms, introduced from the leaf mold. This is easily taken care of with diazanon.

For me, *B. rajah* rests during warmer summer months, but grows actively in the cooler winter months. I grow it under lights that are on 14 to 15 hours a day.

I fertilize only occasionally, and then only with fertilizer of very low N-P-K numbers.

It readily propagates from leaves.

This begonia has been used in creating several hybrids. They include *B. 'Butterscotch'* (*B. subnummularifolia* X *B. rajah*); *B. 'Mumtaz'* (*B. goegoensis* X *B. rajah*); *B. 'Rajkumari'* (*B. sudjanae* X *B. rajah*); and *B. 'Sansouci'* (*B. goegoensis* X *B. rajah*). Interestingly, of the hybrids I found listed, *B. rajah* was always the pollen parent. From its appearance it looks as if it would be a good candidate for crossing with rex begonias, but that does not seem to have ever happened.

