



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.

