
Achimenes

J. C. Taylor, Jr.

Achimenes, or 'magic flowers', make excellent summer plants for hanging baskets in semi-shaded positions with moderate light. Most of them are trailing or semi-trailing in growth habit. Today's hybrids have single or double, $3/4$ - $2\frac{1}{2}$ inch profuse flowers that are tubular in shape with flattened trumpets in all shades of pink, red, blue, purple, yellow and white. For color in the semi-shade of summer, achimenes have no equal, except perhaps impatiens.

The following cultural program is what we follow in our conservatory:

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In early February we remove the dormant scaly rhizomes from the previous year's planting. These rhizomes are underground food storing devices that resemble miniature pine cones and are made up of many tiny scales. Normally the rhizomes are planted whole, but each scale is capable of producing a new plant, so they may be broken into small pieces.

Achimenes require a porous, well-drained growing medium. One of the soilless mixes is fine. We plant directly into 8" hanging baskets in which we plan to flower them. Rhizomes are planted horizontally, 12 to 18 per hanging basket. We cover the rhizome with $\frac{1}{2}$ inch of the medium. We water right after planting, and then give them only enough water to keep the medium barely moist until sprouts appear, to avoid rot. It usually takes 4 to 6 weeks for sprouts to appear, at 60 to 65 degree F nights. They might do better if started even warmer. Once the plants have started into growth, they must be kept evenly moist. If allowed to dry excessively they will be forced into dormancy that cannot be reversed that growing season.

When the sprouts are 3 to 4 inches tall we start pinching out the terminal growth for several weeks, as this encourages bushier, fuller growth, and more flowers. The tips that are pinched may be rooted to start new plants. Each cutting can be expected to produce 5 or 6 rhizomes.

Achimenes require more light than African violets. They do well with about the same light as Gloxinias. Let me hasten to say that too little light will greatly reduce flower production. Care must be exercised in watering to prevent spotting of the leaves. If foliage is frequently wet be sure not to expose plants to bright sunlight until allowed to dry. They may be grown outside in a semi-shady location if care is taken not to let them dry out. We have noticed that with large plants the rain and wind of summer storms will flatten the plants out of shape. They can be cut back severely around the 1st to 15th of July and they will come out with new growth and make nice plants again.

Fertilize achimenes from the time strong shoots appear with a high nitrogen formula. Frequent light applications until flowering begins is good. As new growth slows down reduce the frequency of fertilization, although you will need to fertilize some for as long as the plants are in flower.

Achimenes start to lose their decorative appeal in late summer and fall, and there is no way to prevent this onset of dormancy. Once flowering slows and top growth looks unsightly, let plants gradually dry out. Reduce watering frequency and stop fertilizing. By the time all the stems have died back, the soil should be completely dry. Rhizomes may be unpotted when dry and stored through the winter in vermiculite, but the easiest way to handle them is to leave them in their pots until January or February. Remove the dead foliage and stack them in a place where temperatures will not go below 40 degrees F.

We have tried about 20 different varieties in the department's conservatory over the past several years and of course one always develops an exceptional liking to certain ones. One of my all time

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favorites has to be Tarantella. This has a deep salmon, medium size flower on a plant that does not get too large. The profusion of flowers makes up for its modest size. One of the most strikingly beautiful varieties that I have seen is Great Rosy Red. The color is just as the name implies but it comes out at you in the most vivid and impressive way. The flowers are about 2" with a splotch of yellow at the entrance to the throat. We originally got this one from Parks Seed Company. Some of the other good ones are Wetterlow with large deep pink flowers on a large plant; Fancy - light lavender with purple veins and yellow blotch at entrance to throat, medium in size; Menuet - a medium pink with large flower and medium to large plant; Fritz Michaelson - true blue with yellow at throat with 2-1/8" flowers; Mexicana - deep blue, large 2-1/4" flowers on large plant; Jewel Blue - light purple, large flower and plant. Finally, there is Charm, a miniature. It only gets about half the size of other plants. The flowers are deep pink, about 1-1/2" in diameter. Grow some achimenes -- you'll be glad you did. So will your customers.

Editor's note: J. C. Taylor, Jr., pictured here, is superintendent of the Department of Horticultural Science greenhouses. Anyone who visits our greenhouse facilities will gain an appreciation for his abilities as a plantsman, designer, craftsman, and artist. His comments here are helpful for the commercial grower who wishes to produce achimenes, and for the customers who purchase the plants and want to flower them in future years.



Growers wishing additional cultural information on achimenes should read Karl Wikesjö's article "Growing hybrid achimenes as pot plants" which appeared in the Florists' Review Vol. 168 (4357): pages 34, 120, 122. Karl recently retired from the Swedish University of Agricultural Sciences at Alnarp. He has published many very informative bulletins on the production of crops not yet popular in America. Perhaps Karl, in his retirement, can translate those excellent publications into English.