



Bergenia or Pigsqueak

by Sue Rideout, UC Master Gardener

Many flowers seem to shout for our attention with brilliant colors and showy blooms. Bergenia is a more restrained plant waiting for us to appreciate its glossy green foliage and stalks of delicate pink to red blossoms. Bergenia is also called pig squeak because of the sound produced by rubbing a leaf between thumb and forefinger!

Bergenias are herbaceous perennial plants native to the Himalayas, the mountains of China, and Central Asia. It is evergreen in our Central Valley. They are a member of the Saxifrage family, which includes familiar plants like Coral Bells (*Heuchera*), Foam Flowers (*Tiarella*), and Astilbe. Bergenia is a clump forming plant good for border plantings, accent clumps, or ground covers. It features large rosettes of glossy, leathery dark green leaves up to 10 inches long and 8 inches wide growing to 12 inches tall. Bergenia would be worth growing even if it didn't bloom. But in late winter through spring it sports small bell-like flowers in dense panicles borne on sturdy stalks up to 16 inches high.



Several species can be grown here.

- *B. ciliata* is an elegant but somewhat less hardy plant with shiny light green leaves which can grow to nearly a foot across and white, pink or purplish blossoms. This plant may suffer frost damage.
- *B. cordifolia*, also known as Heartleaf Bergenia has glossy round leaves which are heart-shaped at the base. The leaves are waxy with toothed edges. There are several varieties. Morning Red has bronzy leaves and dark red flowers while Tubby Andrew has leaves variegated with yellow.
- *B. crassifolia* is a winter-blooming plant with rose or purple flowers and glossy rubbery leaves. Mine bloom in mid-February, a nice harbinger of the season to come.
- Named hybrids include Evening Glow with dark red flowers and reddish leaves; Autumn Glory with leaves which turn purplish in the fall and it may rebloom then; and Silver Light with white blooms.

Bergenias are easy to grow. In our warm summer climate they need to be grown in light to full shade. Like azaleas and camellias (*C. japonica*) they will perform best and be easier to grow when planted on the north or northeast side of the garden or house where afternoon shade in summer is guaranteed. They will grow in dry shade and poor soil but prefer a soil with humus and somewhat moist conditions. Our winters easily meet these moisture conditions and in summer months a heavy layer of mulch will keep their roots cool and the moisture contained so excessive watering is not needed. Occasional light fertilizer applications and grooming brings forth their best performance. Give them some protection from winter winds which can scorch their leaves.



Plant in fall or early spring and give them some room as they spread from 20 to 24 inches and will naturalize. Crowded clumps should be divided in spring after they have bloomed. Strong divisions may be replanted in a new area. Bergenias can also be started from seed in sandy soil.

Bergenias have many uses. Their leaves are often used in floral arrangements. Because of their shade-loving nature they thrive under large trees where other flowers fail. Their glossy leaves give a good textural quality to borders and they make bold ground covers in large shady areas. Bergenias are very effective with hostas, ferns, coral bells, and hellebores.

Unfortunately these beautiful plants with year-round appeal have been largely neglected by gardeners. So if you have a shady area which needs some zip, try bergenias for an easy but elegant look.

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