

Third generation of begonia growers

For years, Capitola boasted of being "The Begonia Capital of the World," with world renowned growers and hybridizers located in and around the city.

Today, the lath houses and fields on the city's west side have been replaced with apartments, condominiums, and shopping centers.

But the city is still the headquarters of the wholesale-only Brown Bulb Ranch, the world's single largest producer of begonias and the supplier of the blooms used in the festival this year.

And a short distance outside the city limits on Capitola Road are the world famous retail showrooms of Antonelli's Bros. Begonia Gardens.

Each year, the Brown family grows thousands of begonias for worldwide shipment, and every one of those begonias starts as a microscopic seed in a greenhouse just a stone's throw away from the new Capitola Mall.

With third generation Todd Brown now in charge of the family's growing operations, the family operates two ranches in the Monterey county community of Marina (near Ft. Ord) another in Baja California a distribution center in Seattle, Wash., and its headquarters in Capitola.

The family has over 40 acres of begonias growing at the two ranches, and is the largest in the world, says 74-year-old Alan Brown, now semi-retired.

"In the United States," says Brown, "there are only three places begonias can be grown (from seed) outside."

Climatically, those areas are the entrances of San Francisco and Eureka Bays, and the fog-shrouded hills around Marina.

But economics, land availability and the critical

factors of water and soil dictate that the sand hills of Marinas are the favored spot.

Being on the "sunny" side of Monterey Bay, Capitola is too warm to grow the seedling begonias outside and unprotected, says Brown. "You have to use a lath house and that costs too much — \$50,000 an acre (in 1977).

"The only choice is Marina — the soil, water and climate are just right."

Brown's father started growing begonias in Capitola in 1921. And the Brown ranch quickly attained its standing as a worldwide producer.

But the Browns were more than flower growers. Alan Brown's father, James Brown, brought 14 registered Guernsey heifers to the United States in 1921 and acquired a bull from a local dairy farm.

The Browns sold milk to a creamery for several years and then bottled and delivered milk for sale in Santa Cruz. Cream was sold to the Southern Pacific for use on the dining cars and ice cream was made.

At one point, Brown remembers, the ranch provided most ice cream in Santa Cruz County. The ice cream was sold in another family business, the "Moo Cow Store" with outlets on the Esplanade in Capitola, in Gilroy, Salinas, Ben Lomond, Hollister and Watsonville, plus two each in San Jose and Santa Cruz.

The family operated the stores for five years and made ice cream for nearly a decade. The product was discontinued in 1933 during the depression.

The dairy was operated until World War II when the production of cream and milk were sold to Santa Cruz Beach City Creamery.

During the war, one-half of the milk was sold in bulk to the

naval hospital at the Casa del Rey in Santa Cruz while the remainder was shipped to San Francisco on an alternating day basis.

The milk barn at the ranch is now used for sorting begonia bulbs.

Alan Brown developed a drying tunnel for begonias, then turned to trays and later devised a dehydrating drum for apple pumice.

Using the same principle as making feed from sugar beet pulp, the Browns found that the apple product was sweeter and better favored by cattle.

The apple product is still made at Brown's Bulb Ranch, but now the pumice is sold to a agricultural chemical company which turns it into snail bait and horse feed.

In the 1930s, the Browns moved some of their begonia growing operations to the fog-cooled hills of Marina. Despite the beauty of their blooms, the thousands of plants grown every year in Marina are valuable principally for their bulbs.

Lovely in the home and garden, the flowers are too fragile to market commercially.

"They are essentially a plant for the garden. The flowers don't last like carnations or roses," said Brown.

Brown believes his family is able to compete today in the world begonia market because they have developed the machinery and techniques that beat the high cost of hand labor in the United States today.

One of the first was the adaptation of a potato digging machine to get the bulbs out of the ground.

Today, the techniques used in Marina include a special tractor to punch holes in the sandy soil for the seedlings, the use of water to tamp the soil

around the plants (instead of costly hand labor) and the digging machines to get the bulbs out of the ground a year later.

A few hundred, carefully selected plants are grown each year in the Capitola greenhouses. These are the plants that provide the microscopic seeds used the following season.

Carefully tended and labeled, each of the "seed" plants is hand pollinated in the fall.

"We use less than a pound of seed each year," Brown said. "That seed is worth \$40,000 a pound and the ranch consumes three-quarters of a pound each season.

There are 10 million seeds to a pound.

"We propagate the plants in flats and then move the flats to Marina," he added.

There, after a few weeks of weather "hardening" under lath, the 3-inch high plants are planted in the open fields in December and January.

The plants are tended through the year, and the bulbs are ready for sale the following December, completing the cycle.

The Brown family now grows more than 96 percent of the nation's begonias, with the

remainder produced by the Antonellis.

Antonelli's is the only remaining firm of the four that joined the Browns in the Santa Cruz County area in the 1920s. Once, there were the farms of H.A. Hyde in Watsonville, the Veterli Bros. in Capitola and Rene Bocheaux, who farmed off Clares Street in Capitola.

About 12 years ago, the Browns decided to sell part of their Capitola lands because costly lath houses were needed for Capitola soil, the total acreage was no longer used for cultivation and taxes were rising.

Forty acres were sold to Sutter Hill Ltd. for construction of a Bank of America branch and Sears at 41st Avenue and Capitola.

In 1975, Sutter Hill and Sears moved to annex their properties to Capitola after county politics blocked the construction of the Capitola Mall shopping center and Mervyn's department store to the north of Sears.

The completion of the 75,000 square-foot Mervyn's and 100,000 square-foot mall resulted in an economic boom for Capitola and self-sufficiency for the city's treasury.



Todd Brown checks the pollination process in which Dorothea Costa uses a fine brush to apply pollen to the pistils of a begonia plant at Browns Bulb Ranch. (This is a growing, not a retail operation and is not open to the public.)