

✓ ^{Flowers} New begonia capital is ... Watsonville

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WATSONVILLE — Watsonville, the begonia capital of the world.

Doesn't sound right, does it? But, it's true.

Capitola, which has been home of Brown Bulb Ranch since 1911 — the largest wholesale producer of tuberous begonias and calla lily bulbs in the world — has moved to Watsonville. With the move, which occurred last November, Watsonville can, truthfully, lay claim to being the begonia capital of the world.

That's not to say that Capitola is giving up the public relations' rights. Begonias still grace street signs in the coastal city and the Begonia Festival isn't going away either.

"I don't want to get into that," Todd Brown says, laughing about which city might lay claim to the begonia-capital title. "To me, Capitola is always going to be where we started. More begonia seedlings got their start there than any other place in the world."

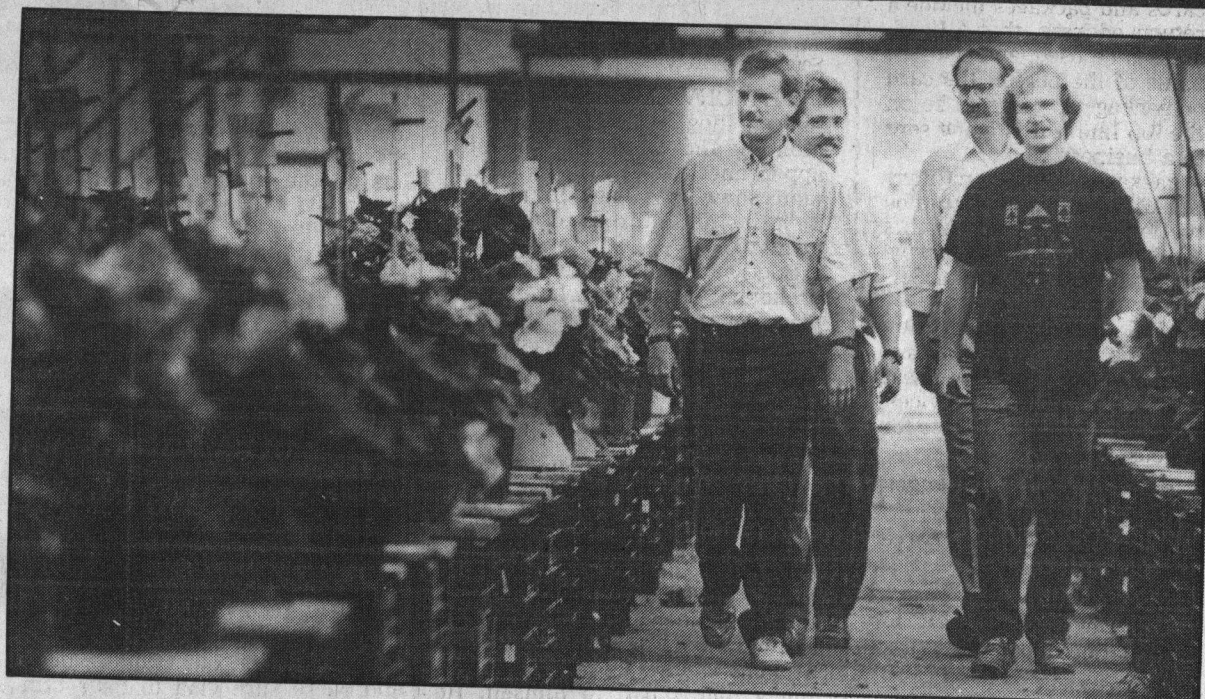
Brown, who along with brother, Barclay, are grandsons of Brown Bulb Ranch founder James Brown, estimates the company has introduced some 20 varieties of tuberous begonias to the horticultural world, along with numerous colored calla lilies. Another dozen or so other bulbs are grown as well.

Introductions that home gardeners can find gracing their local garden center includes "pico-tee," or bi-colored begonia flowers, along with "multi-flora," which combines an upright rose form with ruffled flowers. A scented hanging basket variety is among the newest bulbs.

With the move to Watsonville also came a new name. The company sold the portion of the business that buys and sells flower bulbs, and now only grows and hybridizes bulbs. Thus, the new name: Golden State Bulb Growers.

The 15-acre site, adjacent to Hilltop Cold Storage off Highway 1, allows a centralized location for the business. Although the bulbs are grown on 113 acres in Marina in Monterey County, some 7,000 "parent" plants grow — and bloom — in 84,000 square feet of greenhouses in Watsonville. Those "parent" plants, some of which are 20 years old, offer the best colors and attributes that might be hybridized to make new flowers.

The greenhouses are computerized, with temperatures controlled automatically, Brown said. Computers control vents, ceiling curtains, fans and light intensity.



New generation of growers, Nolan Brown, Tom Lukens, Justin Brown and Worth Brown. Bill Lovejoy/Sentinel photos

"Before, we always had to have someone check the greenhouses before they went to bed to make sure temperatures were right," he adds.

The painstaking process of hand-pollinizing plants takes place in the greenhouses. Using sable-haired brushes, workers cross the pollen of plants to come up with new colors and strains of flowers.

"When you have five million begonias in a field, you find some strange flowers," Brown says. "We bring them in, make crosses and see what happens."

At its peak, the former Capitola location comprised some 100 acres and more than 50 farm structures. It started in 1911 as a five-acre strawberry farm, but James Brown switched over to begonias because of strawberry wilt disease. He later started a dairy business to use the manure for his begonia crop. Old-timers can remember when 41st Avenue was a sea of begonia fields.

The Capitola acreage will soon become the Brown Bulb Ranch Marketplace, 86,000 square feet of retail stores. But the Brown's are still keeping things all in the family.

Barclay Brown's daughter, Andrea Rivers, will coordinate construction and operation of the new shopping center. Todd Brown has turned over bulb-growing responsibilities to his nephew, Justin Brown, and his sons, Nolan and Worth Brown. Justin is in charge of field production, while Nolan is bulb-warehouse manager and Worth is shipping/purchasing coordinator.

"I think it's nice the younger generation has a new facility to work with," adds Todd. "They'll continue the tradition."



Todd Brown in hot house near Watsonville.