

Capitola

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# How Capitola Became the Begonia Capital of the World

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The Brown Bulb Ranch at Capitola, California, is the largest grower of tuberous begonias in the world. Brown supplies about 90% of the begonia tubers sold in the United States. Its rise to this dominant position can be attributed to the foresight of James Brown (1890-1931).

James was a native of Indiana, where his family had banking interests. He obtained a degree in mining engineering from the University of Missouri, then came to California for his health. Soon he found himself in the dairy hardware business in Sonoma County, dealing principally in farm wagons, carriages and accessories.

With the advent of the automobile, James went along with the trend and acquired agencies for such early day brands as Auburn, Chapmobile and McFarland. All were well-known autos of the day and were sold to farmers and business people who wanted more luxury than was available in a Ford.

Because of continuing poor health, James, his wife and family of two boys, spent part of the year in Santa Cruz, then, as now, an important beach resort area. Brown acquired six acres near Capitola and decided to move there after selling his business in Healdsburg in 1911.

His move coincided with the early days of the strawberry boom. Brown grew several

crops until the inevitable appearance of strawberry wilt required a move to new property. There were no wilt-resistant strawberries in those days, but there was plenty of available land to start afresh.

Brown had been experimenting with growing bulbs — calla lilies, freesias and gladiolus. This led to a successful venture with tuberous begonias, and by 1921 Brown Bulb Ranch became the leading source.

The use of redwood sawdust as a soil amendment was still many years away in spite of the fact there was a thriving redwood lumber industry in the area. Manure was the available soil amendment and Brown was not happy with its attendant production of weeds.

Purely by chance, Brown heard of a Guernsey herd that was to be sold to settle an estate close by. The idea that this herd would supply a fine source of manure appealed to the enterprising James Brown who by keeping the manure covered, limited contamination by weed seeds. So, practically overnight, he was in the dairy business in addition to being a bulb grower.

He soon found that Santa Cruz could not absorb all of the production of this premium grade milk, so he made arrangements with Southern Pacific Railroad to supply all of the milk required by their dining cars. This

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79

that remains is to continue selection for larger flowers, differing color shades, resistance to heat and mildew and a longer flowering season. Now it is not unusual to see flowers eight to ten inches in diameter!

In developing the ruffled doubles, growers found they had a good range of colors in a form without the ruffled petal edge. These same flowers had high centers similar to the rose. Although they do not have the popularity of the ruffled doubles, there is enough demand to grow them as a separate class, called rose form.

Spectacular success has attended the development of improved hanging basket strains. No longer is the gardener stuck with tiny single flowers in a restricted color range. The improved hangers have large flowers which are really double and are available in a fine assortment of colors, including some with a picotee edge.

There has been a great improvement in upright plants with picotee flowers (contrasting colors between the main part of the petal and its edge). About a half-dozen distinct combinations are now available.


The gardener planting tuberous begonias has two choices in time to set out tubers and plants. The tubers become available in February and are mainly used in pots and hanging baskets. A second planting season comes in mid-April when seedling plants in two-inch pots are ready for planting through May. These are mainly used for bedding in the open ground.

There was a time when begonia gardeners made up their own planting mix. This is no longer necessary. Nurseries have prepared planting mixes and potting soils for general use that are very good for begonias, whether tubers or seedlings.

When opening a bag of planting or potting mix you will usually find it so dry that it does not readily absorb water. This situation is easily corrected by pouring a very small amount of soil penetrant in the sprinkling can used to give the new plants their first irrigation.

To keep potted plants from becoming top-heavy, be generous in the selection of pot size. A small seedling from a two-inch pot

should have a six-inch pot. A one-and-a-half-inch tuber needs an eight-inch pot and a large two-inch tuber should have a ten-inch container. The same generosity in container size should be followed when making up hanging baskets.

There was a time when tuberous begonias were given as close attention as premature babies. Not any more — American-grown begonias, through selection, have more resistance to sun and heat, as well as to mildew. They are no longer the garden problem-children of the past! 

## Plants Wanted

The following plants, rare in commerce, are wanted by readers. If you can offer seeds or other propagating material of any of them, or know of a possible source, please communicate with the inquirer at the address given.

*Cercis chinensis*, *Koelreuteria henryi*, *K. bipinnata*, *Daphne bholua*, *Jacaranda chelonata*, *Viburnum rigidum*, *Acer sikkimense*, *Cornus chinensis*.

Dr. J.E. Craig, 75 New South Head Road,  
Vaucluse, NSW 2030, Australia

*Ranunculus hystriculus*, *Satureja candleri*,  
*Satureja mimuloides*.

Dara E. Emery, Santa Barbara Botanic Garden  
1212 Mission Canyon Road,  
Santa Barbara, CA 93105

*Clematis cirrhosa*

James L. Jones, 45 Middle Street,  
Lexington, MA 02173

*Elaeagnus multiflora*.

Margaret Farris, Star Route  
Box 190, Langlois, OR 97450

*Analecia vulgaris* 'Nivea', *Brunnera macrophylla* 'Variegata', *Chrysanthemum corymbosum*, *C. serotinum* (*C. uliginosum*), *Ichneops ruthenicus* (*I. ritro tenuifolius*), *Limnolopia longiflora*, *Ranunculus acutifolius* 'Major'.

Hitch Lyman, 514 West End Avenue  
New York, NY 10024

*Prunus maritima*.

Elizabeth L. Wood, 9643 50th Avenue S.W.,  
Seattle, WA 98136