

Begonia seeds worth more than gold

When Capitola Begonia Festival Nautical Parade participants begin to pick the more than 75,000 flowers next week that will be used on their floats, they can rest assured they are getting the cream of the crop.

The field in which they will be picking is not only the single, largest begonia field in the nation, it is owned by the single, largest begonia grower in the world, Brown Bulb Ranch, which has headquarters in Capitola.

Together with nearby Antonelli Brothers' Begonia Gardens, the two companies combine to grow a whopping 99 percent of the begonias in the United States! It is no wonder that Capitola has become known as the "Begonia Capitol of the World."

Interestingly, the beautiful begonia flowers — although important for their color and characteristics — are not why Brown's is in business. It is the bulbs, not the flowers, that bring the recognition, says Allan Brown, one of the owners of the longtime family business.

The bulb business, according to Brown, is one of a "continuous circle." Of the five million plants grown each year, each will produce one bulb. Some 6,200 "parent" plants are dug up from the fields yearly and taken back to the company's 41st Avenue greenhouses where they will undergo Brown's specialized hybridizing and breeding process.

"When you have five million plants to select from, we obviously have a better chance to get good specimens compared to other growers," says Brown. "There's literally no other



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grower in the world that can compete with us."

While the home ranch has whittled down in size over the years with the emergence of the area as a commercial hub, five giant greenhouses still dominate the ranch. Ranging in size from 1/4 to 3/4 of an acre, the superior "parent" plants are all individually planted and labeled, and placed in the airplane hanger-type greenhouses.

They are then hand pollinated to produce the valuable seed. Three persons work all summer simply doing the epollinizing.

One of them — Dorothy Costa — has been at it for 12 years now. Using a tiny camel hair brush, she maintains she pollinizes about 2,000 flowers a day, "taking the place of bees."

This laborious process insures true colors. Over the years, Brown's has been responsible for numerous introductions of colors including many of the new picotee or mixed colors.

One color begonia that nobody has

been able to get, however, is blue. "I'll give you \$100,000 right now for a blue begonia," Brown says.

The tiny begonia seed is worth much more than even gold by comparison in weight. The ruffled varieties go for about \$1,800 an ounce, with hanging basket types at \$2,600 an ounce. So tiny is the seed that a sewing thimble will hold 40,000.

The seed is later transplanted into flats in what Brown calls a "laboratory operation." The slightest

Allan Brown is lost in a sea of begonias, all individually identified with labels.

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Allan Brown takes a close look at one of his begonias.