

# Creek Show

Begonia Festival

By WALLACE BAINE

wbaine@santacruzsentinel.com

9-2-10

✓ **The flowery floats at the Begonia Festival's Nautical Parade are all about working together the Capitola way**

If you're at all media-savvy or opportunistically minded, you might watch the annual Nautical Parade at the Capitola Begonia Festival and be struck with one thundering insight:

Hey, this would make a great reality-TV show!

After all, we're talking about a handful of creative and energetic people competing in teams to make a sea-worthy vessel covered in begonia blossoms that also has to wow the judges and crowds lining Soquel Creek every September. Design, teamwork, competition, the possibility something could go wrong – the pitch writes itself.

Don't think, however, the idea hasn't already been entertained by those who participate in the event – to take place this weekend in Capitola Village. And what many have already figured out is that the Parade on the Creek would, in the end, be a lousy TV show. All that stuff that gooses the ratings for reality TV – conflict, melodrama, narcissistic behavior – not a factor at the Begonia Festival.

"It's not like it's a big cutthroat competition," said Numa Trepanier who first got involved building floats in the Nautical Parade three years ago as part of the Up The Creek Gang. "Everybody really just helps everybody else. A newbie can come in here and they'll get a lot of support."

Indeed, if you walk the narrow streets of Capitola Village during the summer months, beyond the tourist-laden business district, you're likely to see a float or two in a driveway or garage, skeletal in its plywood-and-chicken-wire frame.

Nels Westman, a wily veteran



LARRY SMITH CONTRIBUTED PHOTOS

of the Parade whose home abuts Soquel Creek, said that it's one of the unwritten traditions of the event that passersby offer up their ideas and comments on any work in progress they might see.

"There are no secrets," he said.

There are also no winner-takes-all,

**In Capitola, (top) the Begonia Festival means wearing begonias head to toe. At bottom, volunteers descend upon Golden State Bulb Growers in Marina on the Saturday of the festival to gather blossoms to use in the Nautical Parade the next day.**

SEE BEGONIA ON D2





# BEGONIA

Continued from D1

eat-or-be-eaten attitudes. As the leaders of the Riverview Rascals, Westman and his team partner John Martorella have won the parade's Grand Prize (\$1,000 to their favorite charity) for the past three years, making them the L.A. Lakers of the Nautical Parade (starting Sunday at 1 p.m.). But in the interest of fairness, the Rascals are absent from the competition this year. Martorella is spearheading another team, and Westman, who has been part of the event in one role or another since 1978, is taking a year off to serve as a kind of unofficial consultant and adviser to the other teams.

"I'm definitely starting to feel the itch to do it again (next year)," he said with a wink.

Westman's first piece of advice: Get started early. "You need to organize a bit," he said. "Don't fall into the trap of procrastination, which will just get you in trouble."

Some time after the beginning of the new year, the Begonia Festival's planning committee announces the theme for the Nautical Parade — this year's theme: Beach Party.

From there, the teams come together and brainstorm. "How well you reflect the theme is part of your score," said Westman. "So, you just draw it up on a cocktail napkin over a few beers."

The rules are simple: The float must fit on top of the small (8x12 feet) barge that the Festival provides to each participating team. It must be able to move down the creek under its own power (electric motors are the preferred method). It must be covered with begonias. And it must fit under the low-lying Stockton Street Bridge, which is a clearance of about 10 feet or so. (Last summer, the Rascals won the Grand Prize with a float featuring Snoopy in his biplane, which was much higher than the bridge clearance at first. As the float got closer to the bridge, Snoopy was gradually lowered to create the effect that he was flying under the bridge).

With the rules in mind, the work begins and though the construction on the float itself may be just a two- or three-man (or woman) job, the finished product will often require the efforts of 50 to 60 people, thanks mostly to those pesky begonias.

On the Saturday morning of the Begonia Festival, hundreds of the festival's main participants are, strangely, not even in town. They are, in fact, a half hour's drive to



LARRY SMITH CONTRIBUTED PHOTO

Nels Westman (right), John Martorella and a few volunteers pilot the winning float from the 2009 Nautical Parade on Soquel Creek.

## IF YOU GO CAPITOLA BEGONIA FESTIVAL

**WHEN:** Friday through Monday

**WHERE:** Capitola Village

**COST:** Free admission

**DETAILS:** [www.begoniafestival.com](http://www.begoniafestival.com) or 476-3566

the south, at the Golden State Bulb Growers gardens in Marina. It is at Golden State Bulb where parade volunteers fan out across the 30 acres of gardens to pick the fresh begonias needed for the floats the following day.

The "harvest" of the flowers — a float requires about 400 boxes of blossoms — is also a good opportunity for a little community-building, as friends and neighbors busy themselves picking flowers in a beautifully manicured environment.

"You need to pay attention, of course," said Westman, citing each team's requirements for specific numbers of differently colored blossoms.

Then comes the scramble back to Capitola, huge boxes of begonias in tow, to apply the flowers to the float, an exacting task that requires battalions of more volunteers.

"The most enjoyable part of the process is the building of the it," said John Martorella, whose mother participated in the first Capitola Begonia Festival in 1952. "There's always someone who needs a little help in getting every thing right."

Like the water level on Soquel Creek, the number of participants in the Nautical

## IF YOU GO BEGONIA FESTIVAL

**FRIDAY:** Movie @ the Beach: 'Beach Blanket Bingo,' starts at dusk, Esplanade Park

**SATURDAY:** Sand sculpture contest, 8 a.m. to noon; 'Budding Artists' event, 9 a.m. to noon, both at Beach Seawall; evening concert Mike Hadley & the Groove, 4 to 6 p.m.; Movie @ the

Beach: 'Mamma Mia', dusk, both at Esplanade Park; float construction viewing, 4 to 10 p.m. Soquel Creek Pathway

**SUNDAY:** Horseshoes on the sand, 8 a.m. to noon, Capitola Beach; chalk art, 9 a.m. to noon, Beach Seawall; 'Begonias Head to Toe,' 10 a.m. to noon, Esplanade Park; Nautical Parade, 1 to 3 p.m. Soquel Creek Pathway; evening concert, The Houserockers, 4 to 6 p.m. Esplanade Park.

**MONDAY:** Fishing Derby, 6 a.m. to noon, Capitola Wharf; children's art event, 11 a.m. to 2 p.m., Esplanade Park; rowboat races, noon registration, Soquel Creek Pathway.

Parade has fluctuated from year to year. This year, there will be 11 floats in the parade, a nice increase from last year's eight. Cash prizes for those judged to be the best floats in the parade all go to local charities.

"The beauty of the festival," said participant Numa Trepianer, "is that there is no cash prize. It's just bragging rights. People do it just to bring joy to other people. The only reason to do it is to spread a little joy in the community."