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# In the past 34 Years, the Begonia Festival has Bloomed into Capitola's Claim to fame And fun

by Rick Hildreth

**T**HIS begonia flower is usually tossed aside at harvest time. The plant's petals have aesthetic value only. And for 34 years, Capitola has milked it for everything it's worth.

The city wears millions of the blossoms during the Begonia Festival (highlighted again this year by a nautical parade on Sunday), a true local tradition amidst whippersnappers such as Shakespeare Santa Cruz (6 years old), the Calamari Festival (8 years old) and the Wharf to Wharf race (age 15).

It's also our "last fling of the summer," said Dianne Graves, three-time festival president. "It has always remained our party. It just so happens that 20,000 people come."

This tradition remains a purely community event in spite of the throngs. There is no corporate sponsorship, no effort to raise money for a charity, no government grants. Festi-



The Nautical Parade has a new theme every year, and is the highlight of Capitola's annual party.

# PETAL PARTY

val organizers depend on selling T-shirts, posters, wine glasses and spaghetti to produce the event. Float builders find their own backing, too.

There was only one exception. One year Eastman Kodak learned that an arsonist had burned all the barges used for the floats. They offered festival organizers a substantial sum of money, which was "very graciously accepted," Graves said. A loan from the city of Capitola helped pay the

rest of the bills, and that was the only time the festival relied on anyone else for funding.

Graves, a 21-year festival veteran (with her husband, Capitola city councilmember Ron Graves, also a festival past president), has seen the event grow and thrive, though the times and face of the community continue to change.

### Millions of Blossoms

It used to fall to Pat Antonelli's Begonia Gardens to come up with the festival's blossoms, as the whole idea behind the event came from his wife, Helen, and friend Vivian Benias. The women had set out to find a use for the thousands of flowers Antonelli threw away after harvesting their bulbs every year, and they did.

In 1953, some people put begonias on surfboards and launched the first nautical parade. A few Capitola residents decorated their homes with the flowers. The next year brought with it a water show, and a tradition was born.

It takes nine begonias to fill a square foot on one of today's elaborate floats, many containing a surface area of thousands of square feet.

Most of the begonias now come from Worth Brown's Brown Bulb Ranch in Marina, thanks largely to former President Richard Nixon.

His 1972 re-election campaign included a Southern California rally employing 30,000 of Antonelli's begonias. Five days before the parade,

Graves and other festival organizers discovered they wouldn't have enough flowers.

"At about quarter to 10 at night either the Wednesday or the Thursday before the parade, Mr. Brown offered his growing fields to us," she said. That saved the festival and earned Brown loyal field-gleaners.

Since then, float builders have trekked to Marina at 6 a.m. the Saturday before the parade to pick blossoms, "your basic stoop labor," said Dan Larson of Green Earth Singles, a group that has put a float in the water for the last three festivals.

They gather more than blossoms and backaches, though. Working on the frivolous, colorful project brings neighbors, offices and friends together. Few ever join for glory or trophy, Graves and participants say.

### The Builders and Sailors

The 302 Cherry Street Gang, a regular festival winner and crowd-pleaser, raises its float-building money by hocking \$25 T-shirts. As some 125 people are connected to the gang in one way or another, each buying a T-shirt, these folks can afford a float that rivals the work of special effects studios.

Gang members get plenty for their buck: Friday night, anyone wearing a gang T-shirt gets free margaritas at Margaritaville, free beer and sandwiches while building the float Saturday and admission to a private block party at Jade Street Park.

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## Petal Party

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"The only way anyone else can get into the party is if they're holding the hand of someone wearing a T-shirt," said gang co-leader Toby Sutton.

Known for their elaborate, animated floats, the gang is a loose assemblage of friends and acquaintances of Sutton, his brother Joe and Mark Adamick, all who years ago lived at 302 Cherry St., Capitola. Their first effort won second place in its division in 1984. Their "Mother Goose" took the 1985 grand sweepstakes award, as did 1986's "Jabberwocky."

This year, they've invented their own fable to qualify for this year's mythology theme: the "Tale of Captain Tola." Rather, Sutton said, they *found* this ancient story from 9,000 B.C., telling how Captain Tola of Atlantis was dispatched to resettle the begonia flower when Atlantis sank beneath the waves, and how he and his faithful parrot, Aptos, came to the northern, more attractive end of Monterey Bay.

Sutton expects the "Captain Tola" float will use 20,000 flowers, compared to 15,000 that illuminated "Jabberwocky."

The Green Earth Singles don't get as elaborate with their entries, though they have a UCSC engineer at hand. "I sketch out something," explained Nilsson. But "I'm not really very artistic. We have some people in the group who are handy with painting or sculpting."

Larson guessed that 125 people would get involved in some part of the building of their "King Neptune" float this month. "We see people we sometimes haven't seen in a year," he said.

The County Office of Education pays for the float its employees and their friends build.

Although their constructions are among the simpler entries (no animated figures, no spraying water, no flame-throwers), their dedication and love of the festival pays off. In 1981 they took third place among group entries, in 1983 they earned president's choice and in 1985 they got an honorable mention. *Sunset Magazine* wrote them up.

Some 50 people join the process, said group leader Karleen Quick, an administrative assistant at the office. The design is done by committee. "Maybe that's why they're not animated," she said.

### The Particulars

Last week's sand sculpture contests, rowing races, and fishing derby fleshed out the festival, and there's a separate competition for home and business decorating this Sunday.

But nearly everyone turns out for the yearly nautical parade. Some 20,000 are expected to line the banks of the creek, hang off the railroad trestle and block traffic, in search of Capitola's biggest party of the year.

The parade begins at 2 p.m. Sunday, but you'd better get there early.

Pat Antonelli, whose wife started the whole thing 34 years ago, has never seen a nautical parade.

"You can't get in to see it. And I don't like crowds," he said. •