

Capitola's floral past blooms at begonia fest

Begonia Festival

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PARADE OF FLOWERED FLOATS
HIGHLIGHTS THREE-DAY EVENT
WITH A FIFTIES THEME

INSIDE

Music, activities and floats: festival highlights and map.

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By David L. Beck

Mercury News

It takes a little imagination, but if you look at the plywood-and-chicken-wire thingie in Jim Castellanos' front yard just right, you can see ... could that be a '57 Oldsmobile? Something like that. And that big square of chicken wire would be a drive-in movie screen, according to Castellanos.

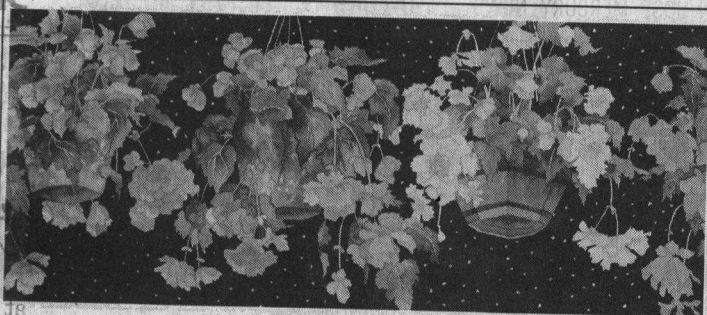
Welcome to the Fabulous Fifties, this year's theme in the Capitola Begonia Festival, where the parade floats actually float and where you can imagine, if only until Monday, that Capitola is still the Be-

gonia Capital of the World.

The festival opens this morning with a sand castle contest that is sponsored, fittingly, by Brown Ranch Marketplace, where today Trader Joe's occupies the site of the old begonia greenhouses. It ends Monday, sometime after the row-boat races.

But its showpiece is the Sunday "Nautical Parade," a procession of half a dozen begonia-bedecked floats on barges that every year packs Capitola Village with spectators. That's what Castellanos and

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"Hanging Begonias" by Marie Gabrielle

PACIFIC GALLERY
& CUSTOM FRAMING

SPECIAL TO THE MERCURY NEWS

"Hanging Begonias," by artist Marie Gabrielle, was selected as the winning poster for the 2003 Capitola Begonia Festival.

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crew are aiming for.

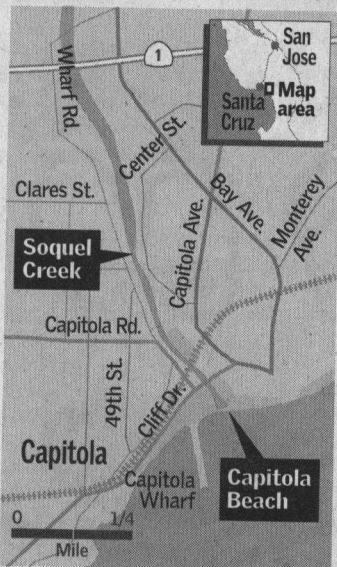
This morning early, Castellanos, five other float makers and a lot of their friends and helpers will start plucking blossoms in Monterey County, where Golden State Bulb Growers has nearly 35 acres of tuberous begonias. Golden State sells the tubers from which these begonias grow, not the flowers, so it's happy to give away the blooms, nursery manager Andy Snow said.

Castellanos estimates that about 500 boxes of flowers at roughly 30 to 40 flowers per box will be needed to cover the frame of his '50s cruiser and movie screen. The frame is already marked with colors — red here, orange there, plenty of white. (But no blue — the color doesn't exist in the tuberous begonia gene pool, according to Snow.)

After the picking comes the wiring. "By, you know, 6 o'clock Saturday evening, it's all done," said Castellanos, a Saratoga real estate man with a week-end place on Soquel Creek.

Capitola's Begonia Festival

Festival will be held at Capitola Village and Beach from Saturday to Monday. A floating parade will also take place on Soquel Creek.



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FESTIVAL HIGHLIGHTS

The 51st annual Capitola Begonia Festival begins at 8:30 a.m. today.

After the picking comes the wiring. "By, you know, 6 o'clock Saturday evening, it's all done," said Castellanos, a Saratoga real estate man with a weekend place on Soquel Creek. "There's a lot of provisions happening — you get a lot of help."

With the chicken wire and plywood for the floats donated by local firms, Castellanos said he might spend as much as \$1,500 on those provisions. What does he get out of it?

"You get a story in the local paper, that's about it," he said. But — remembering last year's parade — "It was a ball. We had a great time."

Traditionally the floats have been people-powered, with pushers and pullers wading down the shallow creek. The 1959 festival queen, Maureen Trent Ware, recalls floating down Soquel Creek in her white evening gown while standing nervously on a pallet-size float pushed by a "young boy."

This year, however, state officials have ruled against having people disturb the creek that way. So the floats will be rowed or pulled by kayaks or pushed by electric motors, depending on whatever contrivance the float makers come up with, parade chair John Doty said.

Moving slowly, so as to prolong the event, the floats will descend Soquel Creek one at a time, starting opposite Shadowbrook Restaurant, into the lagoon, as locals call the pond where the creek dead-ends on Capitola Beach.

Then they will return part-way and anchor for the day. Rather than being torn down later Sunday, as was the custom in the past, the floats will remain on view behind the Esplanade, Doty said.

Ware, one of two former queens and six princesses who will share a float this year, recalls her reign fondly. She said winning "had nothing to do with talent. It had nothing to do with bathing suits. It was how many tickets you could sell. That's what I liked about it."

She rode on the raft in her white Emma Domb gown, with crown, robe and scepter, while on a full-size float behind her came the princesses, in Emma Dombs of various colors. "I really enjoyed it," said Ware, now 60. "For a moment, I felt — I felt pretty."

Now in its 51st year, the Begonia Festival is followed almost immediately in the Capitola calendar by the city's other big end-of-season bash, the Art & Wine Festival on Sept. 20-21.

But the Begonia Festival is special, because it celebrates the days before Capitola be-

FESTIVAL HIGHLIGHTS

The 51st annual Capitola Begonia Festival begins at 8:30 a.m. today with a sand sculpture contest on the beach and ends Monday with a fishing derby, rowboat races and children's art events. A few highlights:

Float construction — beginning this afternoon. The path along the north side of Soquel Creek is public. Stairs lead down to it from the bridge, across the street from Margaritaville.

Nautical Parade — 1 p.m. Sunday. Watch the floats from the beach, from Capitola Road, from both sides of the creek or from the railroad trestle.

Volleyball — 1-5 p.m. today on the beach

Horseshoes on the Sand — Sunday morning beginning at 8

Rock bands — 6-8 p.m. today, 4-6 p.m. Sunday

Poster signing — by artist Marie Gabrielle, 11 a.m. to 4 p.m. today, Pacific Gallery.

For information go to www.begoniafestival.com or call (831) 476-3566.

came the car-lot and shopping-mall capital of Santa Cruz County. Back then, what is now the Brown Ranch Marketplace was the center of the Brown Bulb Ranch, the largest wholesale distributor of tuberous begonia bulbs west of the Mississippi.

With two retail grower-sellers, Vetterle & Reinelt and Antonelli Brothers Begonia Gardens, as well as the Brown operations, the Capitola Businessmen's Association was able to proclaim the city "Begonia Capital of the World" and launch a festival to celebrate that status.

Antonelli Brothers remains in business, though on a smaller site just outside the Capitola city limit. The Browns sold their distribution setup and their name in 1983 but kept the bulb-growing operation, which they renamed Golden State and moved to north Monterey County.

Ironically, while Golden State remains a world leader in bulb production — even shipping bulbs to Holland — what Snow calls "the demands of fashion" have made the calla lily, nature's contribution to art deco design, top dog at Golden State. Of about 800 acres under cultivation, only about 35 are still devoted to tuberous begonias.

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