60th annual Begonia Festival returns

Tarmo Hannula/Register-Pajaronian file

Floats adorned with begonias take part in the 58th annual Begonia Festival's Nautical Parade in 2010 in Capitola.

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CAPITOLA — The 60th annual Capitola Begonia Festival begins today and continues through Sunday. The free, family-oriented event showcases thousands of begonia blooms at its peak event on Sunday in the Nautical Parade. This year, eight floats will meander along Soquel Creek between 1 and 3 p.m.

Today the festival features begonia float construction, the budding artists exhibit, a sand sculpture contest and more. Sunday kicks off with horseshoes on the sand, chalk art on the seawall, designing and creating a begonia-festooned hat (bring your own hat), the nautical parade and a concert on the Esplanade.

The homespun festival has roots in the coastal climate of Santa Cruz County, which is hospitable to tuberous begonias. Major begonia growers were located in Capitola and Santa Cruz in the mid-20th century, and a festival in late summer — when the begonias are in spectacular bloom — became a way to extend the late-summer coastal tourist season.

The Pacific begonia, as it is known, was hybridized in Capitola. At the turn of the century, the James Brown family moved to 41st Avenue in Capitola and tried for years to develop a sustainable agriculture to assure their survival in this sparsely populated, primarily tourist area called "Camp Capitola." The Browns eventually crossbred varieties of begonias from Germany and Belgium and developed the Pacific begonia. From the 1930s to the 1970s, about 90 percent of the world's begonias came from the Brown Bulb Ranch in Capitola.

In 1951, the Capitola Water Follies featured paddleboards decorated with begonias. The next year was the first year of actual begonia floats.

For a schedule and parking shuttle information, visit www.begoniafestival.com.