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'New era' begins at the Gardens

*With new opportunities to grow,
Ripley assumes director's role
at Betty Ford Alpine Gardens*

VAIL, Colo. (Aug. 30, 2011) — Perhaps it's the spirit of this nonprofit's namesake, or the solid character of the native alpine plants at its heart and soul, but America's highest botanical garden is weathering recent storms just fine, thank you, and gearing up for a vibrant future.

In the wake of the death this summer of former first lady Betty Ford, new municipal funding opportunities have prompted a restructuring, of sorts, at Betty Ford Alpine Gardens, in Vail's Ford Park.

"We're definitely beginning a new era for the Gardens," says Nicola Ripley, the nonprofit's horticultural chief for 10 years, who this summer took on the duties of director, as well. "We miss the worldwide exposure, wisdom and guidance Mrs. Ford offered us for more than two decades. But her legacy lives on with Vail sitting on something of inherent value worldwide. While our work here depends on private donations — and that sometimes presents enormous challenges in funding — we push on toward some very important goals."

Betty Ford Alpine Gardens, at 8,250 feet above sea level, is the highest botanical garden in the United States — and perhaps the world — providing free access to an estimated 100,000 visitors annually. Open to the public 365 days a year, its mission is to conserve plants of the American West and inspire passion for plants in high-altitude communities through beautification, conservation, education and research programs.

Ripley, with a master's degree in ecology from University College of North Wales, has worked for some of the giants in the field, including the Nature Conservancy Council and the Institute of Terrestrial Ecology, in England. For five years, before joining the Gardens in 1996, she was co-owner and director of Montane Environmental Solutions Ltd, an environmental consulting company based in Eagle County that conducted rare plant studies, environmental-impact analyses and wetland surveys for private and governmental clients.

In 2008, Ripley was named president of the American Public Gardens Association, a role that allows her to share tables with some of the world's other leaders in conservation. It's work that

serves her passion, she says, but it also builds upon Betty Ford Alpine Gardens' credibility, and, in turn, brings worldwide attention to Vail.

"I take my new director's role seriously at this unique place, which is very important not only to Vail's past and future, but as a research center and botanical laboratory for one of the most vulnerable ecosystems in the world," Ripley says. "It's interesting, and it's all fun. But it's on the cutting edge, too, making Vail an important place on the global conservation map."

Betty Ford Alpine Gardens, meanwhile, is at the center of several proposed projects that are part of new master plan for Vail's Ford Park, which also includes the Gerald R. Ford Amphitheatre and an extensive outdoor multi-sports complex. If Vail voters approve funding for a new conference center this fall, Ripley says, some of those funds, via the town's real-estate transfer tax, or RETT, could be used to build a new entrance to the Gardens from the parking lots on South Frontage Road, along with other improvements.

Ripley, who lives in Eagle, says no matter what Vail voters decide this fall she will continue to supervise an expert staff, including its highly trained interns and throngs of loyal volunteers, who dedicate thousands of hours every year to maintaining and improving the Gardens, offering guided tours and running the nonprofit's gifts shops in Ford Park and Vail Village.

"We're looking at several new opportunities to make the Gardens better than ever," Ripley says. "It's actually a very exciting time for us here at the Betty Ford Alpine Gardens."

Announcements regarding a new development director and new members to the Gardens' Board of Trustees are forthcoming, Ripley says.

Operations and programs at Betty Ford Alpine Gardens, a 501(c)(3) nonprofit organization, are funded entirely through the generosity of donors. For a complete events schedule or more information, call 970-476-0103 or visit www.bettyfordalpinegardens.org.

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