A BLOOMIN’ SUCCESS
VAIL’S BETTY FORD ALPINE GARDENS HAS FLOURISHED FOR 20 YEARS

Story by Stephen Lloyd Wood
Photos courtesy of Betty Ford Alpine Gardens

Success stories can be like a bountiful garden: Seeds are sown with vision, timeliness and hard work, and maturity comes slowly after years of careful nurturing.

Such is the remarkable story of Betty Ford Alpine Gardens, which started out simply as a place to display local flora but has flourished as a valuable local tourist attraction and a world-renowned botanical research center on the cutting edge of technology.

“It is said in song and in scripture that ‘To everything there is a season.’ So it is with great pleasure that we celebrate our 20th anniversary this spring and summer,” says Ann Kurronen, the Gardens’ executive director. “While we certainly have important issues to face that affect plant life, such as global warming, population expansion in Eagle County and energy exploration in our nearby mountain landscape, we still need to make way for rejoicing.”

A ‘GLEAM IN THE EYE’

After two decades of growth and development in Vail’s Gerald R. Ford Park, the Gardens’ story actually began in 1983 as the “gleam in the eye” of a local landscape designer and nursery owner, Marty Jones. Inspired by a visit to the Denver Botanic Garden, he discussed his vision for creating a similar garden at a higher altitude in the Rocky Mountains with Helen Fritch, then a gardening hobbyist who listened to his ramblings during a chance automotive journey together. His truck had broken down on the highway near Georgetown, and Fritch recognized him and drove him the rest of the way.

“Helen was a customer of mine,” says Jones, who still lives in the Vail Valley, owning and operating Wildflower Farm Garden Center and Gift Shop in Edwards. “She picked me up and we started talking.”

Soon thereafter, Jones proposed a 1.5-acre rock garden within Vail’s existing Ford Park to a group of 40 or so interested local residents at the Manor Vail Lodge, saying it would be a special attraction for visitors in the summer. Consisting primarily of the native alpine plants, he said, the garden would improve the beauty of the larger, 39-acre public park without having to be replanted every year. “It is an art form; it is ever changing. When the snow melts, (the garden) begins to blossom and can bloom until September,” Jones told them, as reported in The Vail Trail. “Ford Park is now a weed patch. But the garden’s location could make it a beautiful sight and a family park, as well as aesthetic education.”

“To a gardener like me,” adds Fritch, still co-owner of the Sitzmark Lodge in Vail Village with her husband, Bob, “it sounded like a good idea and I got involved.”

Within three years, Jones, Fritch and a small group of fellow horticulturists from Vail and Denver had founded the Vail Alpine Garden Foundation, a nonprofit organization; submitted plans for an alpine garden, to be built in three phases, to the Vail Town Council, which approved allocation of the requested acreage in its master plan for Ford Park; and launched a fundraising drive to raise the nearly $1 million building Vail Alpine Garden would cost, with memberships going for between $20 and $1,000.

“The Vail Alpine Garden will be unique,” Fritch said in 1986, going on to become president of the fledgling Vail Alpine Garden Foundation and, ultimately, its president emeritus. “There is no other public alpine garden in North America at this elevation.”

Two years later, in 1988, the Vail Alpine Garden was renamed in honor of former first lady Betty Ford, for her many contributions to the Vail Valley, our nation and beyond.

“I’m a gardener and I love to get my hands in the soil,” Mrs. Ford said upon turning the first shovel of dirt at the groundbreaking for Betty Ford Alpine Gardens. “I’m honored to have this named after me.”

The columbine, Colorado’s state flower, is one of countless species of wildflowers nurtured at the Betty Ford Alpine Gardens.
Above: In 1988, the Vail Alpine Gardens was renamed in honor of former first lady Betty Ford for her many contributions to the Vail Valley. Above, right: The dedication ceremonies for the Gardens at the historical schoolhouse.

GARDENS WITHIN THE GARDENS

Today, 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. Its grounds are divided into four distinct, smaller gardens, each with its own purpose, character and scientific focus.

First to open in 1990, the Mountain Perennial Garden comprises nine specific beds containing more than a thousand varieties of both traditional and unusual mountain perennials, trees and shrubs — from local primroses, mosses and woodland wildflowers to succulents from Asia and Africa, irises from Japan and Siberia, poppies from the Himalaya, saxifrages from the European Alps and water lilies and peonies from all over the world.

The following year saw the completion of the Mountain Meditation Garden, described by Jones as “a quiet, contemplative place to stimulate thought.” This garden now has memorial benches in three different locations offering visitors a variety of peaceful places to relax amid a lush green garden of mountain meadow plants.

It took another ten years to complete the Alpine Rock Garden, with its distinctive log bridges, signature 40-foot waterfall, a large pool and dramatic views from a patio that’s home to dozens of weddings every year. Twelve individual beds are planted with some of the most spectacular alpine plants in the world, from imperiled flowers native to mountain bogs and wetlands to those that flourish in the harshest high-altitude environments.

“Designing and constructing the Gardens, especially one backed with sufficient money and freedom, was a huge opportunity for someone like me,” says Jones, the Gardens’ acting director until the 1990s, when the Foundation hired a professional staff. “I have many wonderful memories from being in that culture of botanical gardens, people who love plants and flowers. It was a wonderful experience, and I’m very proud. It’s nice to have made such a contribution to the community.”

The most recent garden to open was the Children and Schoolhouse Garden, completed in 2002. From a small stone amphitheater built especially for kids programs, interpretive signs
lead visitors along a simulated climb along the banks of Gore Creek to the highest peaks of the Gore Range, at an altitude of more than 13,000 feet, highlighting the different microclimates along the way. Surrounding the adjoining schoolhouse are raised beds planted with herbs and vegetables that thrive in the local environment, where the Gardens offers educational opportunities to gardeners of all ages and experience levels.

The organization, in the next few years, plans to complete another component of the Gardens, the Alpine Tundra Garden surrounding the existing Alpine Plaza at the entrance to the Gerald R. Ford Amphitheatre. This garden will represent the dramatic limestone ranges of the world, showing the ecological processes in the evolution of the mountain tundra.

Above: The Mountain Perennial Garden comprises nine specific beds containing more than a thousand varieties of mountain perennials, trees and shrubs. Below: Betty Ford with Helen Fritch and Marty Jones. Fritch and Jones spearheaded the creation of the Gardens.

THE SCHOOLHOUSE

Amid the alpine flora, the only real building within Betty Ford Alpine Gardens is on the banks of Gore Creek near the entrance to the Gerald R. Ford Amphitheatre. The Schoolhouse Gift Shop — which serves as a museum for the Town of Vail and a gift shop for the Gardens from Memorial Day Weekend through Labor Day every year — is a historical landmark, having been built in 1922 as one of four original schoolhouses in the Gore Creek Valley. The log cabin, first called the Gore Creek Schoolhouse, was used as a school for local children until 1939, when it was retired.

Gwen Scalpello, operations manager at The Schoolhouse, says the land on which the building first sat — on a hillside in the Pine Ridge area above what is now West Vail — was purchased in the 1960s by George “Mac” MacLeod, who refurbished the structure for use as a family ski cabin throughout the 1970s. The family later donated the cabin to the Town of Vail, which moved it to its present location in Ford Park.

President Ford, standing on a hay wagon, dedicated the former schoolhouse on Labor Day Weekend of 1982 as part of the kickoff of the Vail’s 20th birthday celebration. “It rained on dedication day, Sunday, and only about 25 people braved the rain,” Scalpello says, quoting a story in the Vail Trail. “So the formal dedication with Jerry Ford was held the next day with about 200 people.”

Among the local dignitaries, Foundation members and others in attendance, she adds, were Belle Frasier and Marian Kellogg...
of Grants Pass, Oregon, both of whom were residents of the Gore Creek Valley long before Vail, as well as the first teacher at the schoolhouse, Dorothy Van Schaack Carroll.

“I love history, and working at the Schoolhouse puts me more in touch with it. It nurtures a piece of me,” says Scalpello, a longtime volunteer who has logged as many as a thousand hours in one year as a volunteer for the Gardens at the Schoolhouse, as well as the organization’s other gift shop, Alpine Treasures, on the Gore Creek Promenade in Vail Village. “And I love the Gardens. They’re an asset to Vail, and I love working there and sharing the beauty with the people who come here. It’s a place of respite, a place of peace, a place of beauty.”

FOR THE LOVE OF THE GARDENS

It’s a loyal legion of people like Scalpello, donating thousands of hours of hard work every year, who comprises the heart and soul of Betty Ford Alpine Gardens. Volunteers work planting bulbs, pulling weeds or otherwise helping the staff maintain the Gardens; giving informational, guided tours of the grounds as docents; helping run the nonprofit’s gifts shops or working in its administrative office in Vail Village; and organizing and promoting fundraising events, such as lectures and workshops. Last season, nearly five dozen Vail Valley locals donated an estimated 2,100 hours of their time, helping make 2007 the nonprofit organization’s best year ever.

“I get addicted to the Gardens. I love to work with plants, and there’s always so much to do,” says Cristina Prado, a key supporter, who first came to Vail from Brazil in 1973 and has donated money to the Gardens as a member and worked the grounds by hand as a volunteer since the beginning. “It’s a nice group, and I’ve made many friends. It’s wonderful, a real joy.”

Volunteers are instrumental in the Gardens’ educational programs, as well. Throughout its 20-year history, the Foundation has remained committed to providing opportunities for children and adults to learn about high-elevation plants and ecology, inspiring environmental appreciation through a variety of activities. The Gardens offers children’s education programs throughout the summer — such as the popular Butterfly Launch in May — serving an estimated 700 local children. Additionally, the Gardens is one of few organizations in the botanical field to offer horticultural therapy for people seeking the restorative powers of connecting with nature. Using plants, gardening activities, and the natural world in professional therapy and rehabilitation, the program is designed to further a deep connection with nature in a landscape that stimulates and strengthens mental, emotional and physical balance.

Even with the generous donations of time by volunteers, members and other supporters, the Gardens — a 501(c)(3) nonprofit organization funded entirely through the generosity of donors — is always seeking funds to further develop its grounds, facilities and programs. Tax-deductible donations are available, including naming opportunities throughout the Gardens; an independent endowment managed by Gardens’ Board of Trustees; and the Sustainable Roots Plan, providing financial security for the Gardens for years to come.

“We hope to be able to continue to offer our programs free of charge,” says Kurronen, who joined the organization last year.
The schoolhouse, which serves as a museum for the Town of Vail and a gift shop for the Gardens, is a local landmark, having been built in 1922 as one of original schoolhouses in the Gore Creek Valley.

“While memberships are our largest source of income, memorials and honorariums are another significant portion of our donation base. Memorializing someone is a wonderful way to keep the spirit of someone alive while helping out the Gardens, as well.”

‘INFINITE PRIDE AND PLEASURE’

Looking ahead to its third decade, and beyond, Betty Ford Alpine Gardens’ growing green culture continues to mature, its value to the community continues to increase, its reputation as world-class, high-altitude botanical garden and research center continues to evolve. Perhaps no one appreciated its potential more than Mrs. Ford herself.

“As someone who has always loved gardening, it fills me with a great sense of serenity. Just walking along these winding paths, with the abundance of beauty so close to the touch, brings an introspection and sense of calm too often missing in our lives,” she wrote in a letter to the Foundation in 1991.

“I never dreamed it would grow and flourish to such magnitude. But as each season brings new blooms and greater beauty to the Gardens, they become a source of infinite pride and pleasure for all of us. I visit as often as I can, but it is never often enough. Each week provides a different, more beautiful picture.”

Editor’s note: For information about summer events at the Alpine Gardens, see Calendar beginning on page P26. For more information about alpine gardening, see page 68.❤

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CUTTING-EDGE TECHNOLOGY TO HELP THE LOCAL GARDENER

With a vision of being recognized as the foremost authority on high-altitude plants in natural and cultivated landscapes in the Rocky Mountain region and similar environments, the Betty Ford Alpine Gardens not only contributes staff and expertise essential to conservation efforts throughout the region, but also provides an environment for rare, exotic and imperiled alpine wildflowers and plants.

The Gardens’ plant collection showcases more than 3,000 species of high-altitude plants, many of which are from the Rocky Mountains, as well as many other regions of the world.

“Betty Ford Alpine Gardens is more than pretty flowers,” says Nicola Ripley, the Gardens’ director of horticulture, who moved to the Vail Valley from garden-happy England, joining the nonprofit organization’s staff in 1996. “Botanical gardens, in general, are essential in finding out how some plants grow, so we can protect their species. As such, we’re very much a part of the ‘green’ movement growing across the nation and the world.”

With a master’s degree in ecology from University College of North Wales, Ripley is one of the nation’s leading specialists in high-altitude environments, or “those above timberline,” she says. In addition to overseeing the plant collection and research projects at the Betty Ford Alpine Gardens, she travels constantly, giving talks and slide shows to botanic clubs and societies across the United States.

For the past six years, Ripley has been working closely with botanists and ecologists with the U.S. Bureau of Land Management to study plant life on the Roan Plateau, a mountainous area about 100 miles to the west prized not only for its remote backcountry, but also for its rich energy reserves. Two rare plant species are found there — the Parachute penstemon, Penstemon debilis, and the Debeque milkvetch, Astragalus debequeaeus — and she’s planted specimens at the Gardens in Vail, in specially created habitats with similar conditions.

“Botanical gardens provide a place to study endangered plants, so we can help them survive,” says Ripley. “And by making these plants available for viewing by the general public, we can increase awareness.”

To that end, Ripley and Garden’s supervisor Melissa Kirr have been working hard to develop a searchable online database listing, describing and recording the progress and specific location of every single plant in the Gardens, complete with photos — a daunting task no other botanical garden has accomplished, to her knowledge. While photos have been uploaded for just ten percent of the Gardens’ plants so far, the database is available online at www.bettyfordalpinegardens.org. www.bettyfordalpinegardens.org to anyone, from scientists around the world to local nurseries looking to develop inventories of plants that will thrive here in the High Country to amateur enthusiasts interested in researching which plants would grow best in their garden.

“A lot of our members use it already. They’ll see a new plant advertised and they can look it up, see if we’ve tried growing it here at Betty Ford Alpine Gardens and, if so, where it is, so they can come visit and take a look,” says Ripley. “We’ve already tried most of the native plants in the area, so if it doesn’t exist in our database either it’s not native or it’s something we’re not confident is worth trying to grow here.”

Parachute penstemon

Debeque milkvetch