

Bloom

WINTER IN

WRITTEN BY KIM FULLER
PHOTOGRAPHY BY BRENT BINGHAM

*Betty Ford Alpine Gardens opens year-round
alpine greenhouse and education center*



The top green thumb of Betty Ford Alpine Gardens never forgets his flowers — especially his most beloved of the tundra blooms.

“The Alpine Forget-Me-Nots are my absolute favorite flowers,” shares Nick Courtens, senior horticulturalist for the gardens. “I am hoping to grow a lot of those in the Alpine House.”

As an exciting edition to Vail’s botanic treasure, located at 8150 feet in elevation, the Alpine House within the new Education Center of the Betty Ford Alpine Gardens is now helping visitors remember these bright clusters of Forget-Me-Nots, along with many other vibrant varieties of blossoming high-altitude species.



GROWING A *Vision*

"The Education Center was something that was part of the overall dream for the garden when it was started over 25 years ago," says Nicola Ripley, executive director of Betty Ford Alpine Gardens. "There was always a vision to have a building, a home, that was part visitor center, part education center, as well as a space where the public is able to interact with the garden collections in a protected space."

The new building has been tastefully constructed of wood and stone, with tall glass walls that seem to reach up toward the sunshine. It's located on the west end of Ford Park, and it blends to the backdrop of the already beautiful gardens.

Although many people were apprehensive about adding another building to the park, Ripley says sentiments of approval were rolling in during the Education Center's grand opening in August.

"It's going to give us more year-round opportunities for programs, both for adults and children," says Courtens. "That's going to really increase our presence here."

Future programs are still in development stages, but a visit to the center itself is a fulfilling endeavor. Upon walking in, guests can learn from the interpretive and self-guided activities, including wall panels with information about alpine environments and how hearty mountain flowers adapt. The center offers children interactive activity tables, and for new and seasoned green thumbs, there's an extensive library collection, and a helpful kiosk with detailed gardening advice.

"I think it's a great place for people to come in to look and research," Courtens adds. "We have a library, so books on certain plants or things that are relevant to people's interest will be in that exclusive library system, which is connected to the Vail Library and to universities."

Volunteers have a new place to meet inside the facility, and Ripley said the volunteer program for the gardens will continue to expand with volunteer days throughout the year.

Liz Paxson started working with the gardens as a volunteer in 2004, and currently serves as president of the Board of Trustees.



"We hope to offer outdoor activities such as snowshoe walks through the gardens, and indoor activities such as painting, flower arranging and art displays," says Paxson. "We will also be able to offer a venue for garden clubs and botanical researchers."

The building's covered, rooftop deck played host to a live bluegrass band for the Education Center's mid-summer opening, and will continue to be used for special events and education programs.

Treasures OF THE ALPINE

One of the most impressive features of the new facility is the Alpine House, a covered and controlled environment to help Courtens and his team seed some exciting new additions.

"We can grow some things that we haven't been able to before," he explains. "These are really hard to grow, small alpine plants, that actually grow into the rock itself, and to anyone who is passing confuse them with moss, but really they are flowering plants."

The most common flowers in the Alpine House will be of the Saxifrage family, Courtens shares, and even more unique varieties will include Dionysia genus plants, native to mountains in central Asia, that have never been grown before in the Betty Ford Alpine Gardens.

"We're really excited for the fact that we're going to be able to grow our own plants, rather than only acquire the plants from other sources," he says.

The growing team can now propagate from seeds — seeds acquired from others' expeditions, as well as the seeds they collect on their own with the land permits they hold.

"We are not limiting ourselves," says Courtens. "We are really trying to grow as much as we can, and be a diverse, alpine collection."

The new mountain greenhouse will be a home to plants that don't need snow cover, and it's likely that they will flower earlier in the season than normal, extending the flowering season for the indoor garden collections from March through September, Courtens estimates.

The Alpine House will stay cool in the winter, but just temperate enough for people to walk through comfortably.

"It will still be heated enough so there isn't a deep freeze," says Courtens. "So we are really going to see how that affects the plants in there, and see if they really need that deep freeze or not, and how they respond without snow cover."

Like a highlander, Courtens explained, it's not in an alpine flower's best interest to lay its roots in the lowlands.

"It would be much like taking a mountain man out of the mountains and putting him in the city," he says.

"These alpiners, they breathe differently," Courtens continues. "Because they are at high elevation, they have to take oxygen at a much faster rate; that's what they have adapted to, so when you take them out of that environment, they struggle more."

Although Vail isn't located above tree line in the actual alpine zone, the elevation and climate of the Betty Ford Alpine Gardens still simulates the conditions many of the high-altitude plants require. Gardens in Denver, for example, would not be able to grow these varieties like Vail.

"We are actually in a niche for gardens around the world," Courtens explains. "That makes it possible for us to grow really unusual things that no one will see elsewhere, unless they were climbing to the top of a mountain." **VVmag**