

Rising to a Gardening Challenge: Betty Ford Alpine Gardens

by Uziel Crescenzi



Colorful plants adapted to alpine regions around the world entice visitors down a curving path at Betty Ford Alpine Gardens.

NESTLED AMONG the majestic peaks of the Rocky Mountains in Vail, Colorado, the Betty Ford Alpine Gardens (BFAG) champions the world's alpine plants, while conserving and researching their indigenous habitats. Along with its spectacular mountain views comes an environment of extremes. Located at 8,250 feet above sea level, the BFAG is the world's highest public garden; its gardens thrive amid dramatic swings in daily high and low temperatures, shallow inorganic soils, and unrelenting wind.

PLANTS AND GARDENS

BFAG's location may seem inhospitable to plant life, but when the gardens opened in 1986, the founders saw it as an opportunity to celebrate the plants that

thrive in these tough growing environments and help residents learn how to successfully garden in alpine conditions. The city designated five acres within the town park for these purposes and former First Lady Betty Ford, who had once lived in Vail, agreed to allow her name to be used for the garden.

Since then, the BFAG has flourished. More than 2,000 varieties of alpine plants grow throughout the garden, which includes three waterfalls, ponds, woodlands, and a new alpine house for winter observation. The variety of micro-climates within its mountain landscape allows the BFAG to showcase diverse plant collections. For example, there is a "bog" garden, a dryland montane area, and an aspen and spruce forest. Subtle differences

in topography, drainage, and soil type provide opportunities to site species most appropriately.

Sometimes the challenges of growing at this elevation and in this climate are just what a plant needs to shine. Nicola Ripley, BFAG's executive director, often hears visitors wondering, "I grow this plant in my garden at home, but it doesn't flower as well as it does in the alpine garden. Why is that?" Ripley points out that plants' exposure to ultraviolet light is more intense at the garden's elevation, which enhances flowering.

EDUCATION AND RESEARCH

Education is fundamental to BFAG's mission. The garden's educational programs revolve around the Children's Garden,



Opened in 2015, the Education Center offers a wealth of information about alpine flora.

Kid's Amphitheater, and the Schoolhouse Museum and Gift Shop, tied together by a spectacular perennial border of more than 1,000 plants. The Schoolhouse Garden hosts horticultural therapy programs and the raised beds exhibit medicinal herbs once grown by the Incas, Ute Indians, and the mountain people of the Himalayas. The nearby Education Center contains a state-of-the-art alpine house with plants from all over the globe. This summer, it is hosting a traveling exhibit about the effects of climate changes on Arctic landscapes.

The BFAG also curates the North American Plant Collections Consortium

(NAPCC) collection of Colorado alpine flora. The NAPCC is a network of coordinating botanical gardens and arboreta across the continent that focus on establishing plant collections that serve as a resource for plant germplasm, breeding, evaluation, and research.

CONSERVATION EFFORTS

BFAG is also committed to conservation. "This isn't just a pretty garden, there is serious conservation going on in the background," says Ripley. The garden currently partners with the Bureau of Land Management, Colorado Natural Heritage



A footbridge leads over an alpine pool that reflects picturesque mountain vistas.

Additional Information

Betty Ford Alpine Gardens, Ford Park, 522 South Frontage Road, Vail, CO 81657. (970) 476-0103. www.bettyfordalpinegardens.org.

- Open daily, year round, dawn to dusk.
- Admission: Free.
- Betty Ford Alpine Gardens participates in the AHS's Reciprocal Admissions Program. AHS members with a current membership card receive discounts in the gift shop.

Other nearby sites to explore:

Booth Creek Trail, White River National Forest. Vail, CO. www.fs.usda.gov/recreal/whiteriver.

The Children's Museum at Beaver Creek Resort, Avon, CO. www.beavercreekkids.com.

Vail Nature Center, Vail, CO. www.walkingmountains.org.

Program (CNHP), and the Colorado Department of Transportation (CDOT) to preserve, survey, and study threatened or endangered plants and ecosystems. The public can help by participating in the Adopt a Rare Plant Program. In this joint initiative between BFAG and CNHP, volunteers monitor and search for populations of rare plants such as parachute penstemon (*Penstemon debilis*) or the DeBeque milkvetch (*Astragalus debequeanus*), which is only found in Colorado.

Habitat protection is also a priority. Garden volunteers built a boardwalk above the wetlands on the Shrine Pass Trail, a four-mile-long hiking trail through the mountains, to reduce disturbance from visitors. Volunteers also worked with CDOT to protect the unusual canyon bog orchid (*Platanthera sparsiflora*) from off-trail foot traffic by installing signs reminding hikers to stay on the path.

Open year-round, the garden has something for everyone, whether it's a hike on the snowshoe trails, a stroll through the new alpine house, or simply enjoying mountain views as far as the eye can see.

A resident of the Bronx, New York, Uziel Crescenzi just completed an editorial internship with The American Gardener.