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A tour through flower towers

Glacier Gardens blends natural landscapes with cultivated beds

By **GENEVIEVE GAGNE-HAWES**

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At Glacier Gardens Rainforest Adventures, where uprooted trees become gardens and a flooded streambed is transformed into a sprawling trail of ponds and creeks, even the boardwalks seem to be part of nature.

Growing through a wide circle in the board pathway at the top of the garden's winding forest trail is a small tree - a feature that drew the attention of several visitors on a recent tour.

"Only a few trees were removed to make this boardwalk," manager Brad Hartman explained. Co-owner Steve Bowhay "wanted it to follow the lay of the land and give people a place to stretch their legs."

For most of the Glacier Gardens tour, visitors sit in small golf carts, winding their way through a largely untouched forest on the back side of Glacier Highway near Fred Meyer. Small landscaping touches - such as log borders on the path - are visible along the way. "Flower towers," upturned trees whose sprawling root structures have been transformed into flower beds, are the primary attention-getter from tourists.

"It's so beautiful," said a recent visitor who asked not to be identified, staring up at a tree spilling over with flowers. "I have a garden at home, but nothing like this."

Cultivated plants, including begonias, fuschias and petunias, fill the towers and the greenhouse at the base of the hill. But for the most part, the Bowhays and their staff prefer to exploit the natural materials and lay of the land, Hartman said.

"Most (of the tour) is indigenous forest," Hartman said. "Where we've done restoration, there's some landscaping."

Glacier Gardens opened five years ago, but Steve and Cindy Bowhay began working to develop the area in 1994. At that point, they owned seven acres - most of which was covered with mud and rocks from a landslide. Erosion was a pressing problem, and the stream that now darts between five wide pools was snarled, flowing through a log jam.

"First we stopped the movement and built the ponds and stopped the erosion, and once we did that, it stopped killing the trees," Steve Bowhay said. "That's how I decided where the ponds and stuff were going to be, because that's where it had already killed the trees."

They purchased 43 more acres of land from the city in 1997. The main arm of the trail, reaching up to 600 feet from ground level, was built during 1997 and 1998.

Easy access for the elderly and disabled was always a key element of the project, Steve Bowhay said.

"I would say that the most rewarding part ... is being able to wheel someone in a wheelchair out on that boardwalk," he said. "It's a feeling you can't duplicate and you can't explain. It's something that they don't think they're ever going to get to do again and then they get to."

Numerous small touches and another extension of the trail have been added since the gardens opened, with a new leg going into operation this summer. An agreement with the U.S. Forest Service allowed its construction; the winding path to the bottom passes through Tongass National Forest land and gives visitors another glimpse of Alaska wilderness.

Here, the thin trunks of trees are packed closely together, breaking occasionally to allow



Blossoming heart: Employee Loretta Palmer tends to a heart made out of impatiens in the main greenhouse at Glacier Gardens Rainforest Adventures. About 25,000 visitors come to the attraction a year.

BRIAN WALLACE/ THE JUNEAU EMPIRE



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Employee Sterling Snyder "dead-heads" flowers - picking the dead blossoms to encourage growth - on a small island in a manmade pool at Glacier Gardens.

BRIAN WALLACE/ THE JUNEAU EMPIRE

glimpses of the sky. A large fallen trunk is undisturbed; it gives visitors a glimpse of the trees' characteristic "pancake flat" root structure, Hartman said.

"It's a kind of rustic feel on the way down," Hartman added. "Bumpy, but we claim to be an adventure."

During the course of the tour, questions about plant life and weather fly hard and fast. Tour operators detail the two main types of trees in Southeast - spruce and hemlock - and point out unusual plants such as devil's club, discussing their medicinal properties and cautioning against touching their thorns.

"They can't believe how there's (virtually) plants growing in the air in the rainforest," Steve Bowhay said. "In Juneau, it's pretty darn hard to find bare dirt in the forest, and that blows them away. I tell them you don't even want to take a nap here

because you wake up and you've got moss on you."

"I've never seen trees like this before," said a man, a recent visitor who didn't want to give his name. "The view from up top is just so nice."

Often, operators must keep up a brisk pace; buses bring large groups of tourists on a set schedule, and things have to keep moving, Hartman said. Sixty people can take the tour at one time - 15 golf carts are available, and each one is manned by a tour operator. During the summer, about 40 employees work to keep visitors moving smoothly up and down the mountain, Hartman said.

"Many of the tourists don't speak English," Hartman said. "It's a challenge to give them a tour, but they appreciate it. ... There's people who haven't seen wilderness like this. It's cool to get to expose them."

When locals take the tour, the pace is slower, Hartman said.

"I always ask people when I introduce myself if they're visiting," he said, steering the cart smoothly around a tight corner. "I don't necessarily go into the amount of rain we get, because they know that."

With locals, the focus often is on less-known plants and their uses and backgrounds, he said. Without the need to get back down to a bus, there's a little more time to chat.

"Usually we give them the same amount of information about the woods," Hartman said. "The locals are expecting the same thing ... but you can sometimes be a little more relaxed."

"A lot of the time I learn a lot of stuff from locals coming into the woods," he added. "You get to talking about plants, because they're here because of plants."

Hartman estimated that about 25,000 visitors come to the garden each year, including 5,000 to 8,000 locals.

The garden has regulars, Hartman said with a smile, including a "lady with red shoes" who walks the lower loop of the trail for exercise. Some people have taken the tour so many times they'll remind operators who have forgotten to say something in the usual talk.

Wildlife often is visible along the trail, which is thrilling to visitors and locals, Hartman said. Bears, river otters, beavers, eagles and falcons have been spotted on tours.

"We don't have any of these animals under control, no cue buttons or anything like that," Hartman said with a laugh. "But they're here."

Even in rain, the garden tour has something to offer, he said. Streams swell and mist rolls in.

"If you've got the gear, it's spectacular,"



Uncommon planters: Tina Clark, manager for Glacier Gardens, walks Friday up a path lined by upside-down trees with flowers growing from the roots.

BRIAN WALLACE/ THE JUNEAU EMPIRE

Garden tours

Glacier Gardens Rainforest Adventures, at 7600 Glacier Highway, is open from 9 a.m. to 6 p.m. daily. At peak times, the wait for a tour can be 10 to 15 minutes. The cost is \$17.95 for adults and \$12.95 for children age 6 to 12.

For locals who wish to visit the garden multiple times, a seasonal buddy pass is available for \$110. The pass allows the holder to bring a different guest

Hartman said, gesturing to a small waterfall. "At times, the whole shale face is under white water."

At the conclusion of the tour, visitors are invited to tour the Glacier Gardens greenhouse, where flowering plants spill out of hanging baskets in a profusion of color. Visitors' reactions to the sight are among Steve Bowhay's favorite parts of the tour.

"My favorite time is when somebody's knees actually wobble and they reach for support and you know they've been taken back," he said.

each time the holder visits the gardens, with no limit on how many times the holder can visit.

Parking is available, and food can be purchased inside the greenhouse. Photography is allowed once admission is paid.
