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SEARCH

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## Paradise lost and found

*Glacier Gardens Rainforest Adventure started as a scheme to prevent forest erosion and has turned into a lush 50-acre attraction for tourists and locals*

**By MELANIE PLENDA**  
*THE JUNEAU EMPIRE*

Glacier Gardens Rainforest Adventures is here by accident and sheer will, said co-owner Steve Bowhay, and it stays open for the same reasons.

The 46-acre botanical gardens, hidden along Glacier Highway behind Fred Meyer, takes tourists and locals 500 feet up and 1.2 miles into the forest on a golf cart. Guests also can sip coffee from the coffee bar in a visitor center adorned with baskets containing more than 3,000 hanging flowers.

The garden adventure and Glacier Gardens Greenhouse, a wholesale business - both owned by Bowhay and wife Cindy - are not profitable businesses, Steve Bowhay said. But he said as long as he gets to play in the woods and do what he loves the reward comes from knowing the gardens are a dream come true.

The Bowhays have been developing the gardens since 1994 but the grounds have been open to the public only since 1998. Since then they have grown from their original six acres to almost 50 acres covered with lush natural forest as well as the Bowhays' landscaping. Steve Bowhay said that by the end of the season, which runs May 1 through Sept. 6, they will have had 35,000 visitors at \$14.25 a tour.

The Bowhays are developing two new roads for the tour, which will add another half-mile of road to the adventure and make the trek up the mountain a one-way continuous loop, said Manager Brad Hartman. He said they also are adding a pedestrian route.

"The gardens are definitely a work in progress, as is the nature of any



Garden view: Brad Hartman gives a tour of Glacier Gardens Rainforest Adventures to a bus load of visitors Saturday afternoon.

*MICHEAL PENN/THE JUNEAU EMPIRE*

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garden," Hartman said. "We've really been working on this since the beginning."

The first of the two roads will link the main road, which ends at a boardwalk and a point overlooking the Mendenhall Wetlands at 500 feet elevation, to "Waterfall Road," which ends at - what else? - a waterfall.

Hartman said they have been using the road this season but it still needs more landscaping and work before it is complete. The second road, he said, will continue the loop onto several acres of U.S. Forest Service land, through a permit with the agency.

"It will make the gardens bigger and better. There'll be more flowers, more landscaping, more for people to see," Hartman said. "Also, it will allow us to access where the renovation began and what got it all going, and we want to kind of show that off."

Steve Bowhay said the project started as a way to fix the erosion problem in the forest.

"Once I get started on something I just can't quit," Bowhay said. "There's always been an erosion problem and I always kind of had this idea of a botanical garden to fix the problem, but we didn't have money at the time. But we were able to go into debt. And we still are in debt and will be for a long time."

A mudslide in 1984 stripped the rainforest of much of its natural appeal, leaving only twisted roots where once there were trees, and mud where pedestrians previously tread.

Bowhay, who owns a landscape company outside of the gardens and wholesale business, said in 1994 he began just trying to clear a path on six acres he had purchased and place moss on the ground to naturally secure the mud, rock and trees.



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Garden lovers<sup>1</sup> tour: Guests to Glacier Gardens Rainforest Adventures are driven around the grounds in a motorized cart. The garden covers about 50 acres.

MICHEAL PENN/THE JUNEAU EMPIRE

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Then he tried to divert a stream using geotextile material so it wouldn't dry up. Next thing he knew, he said, he was buying nearly 40 acres from the city and building a road for golf carts to take people into the forest.

"I've been here for eight years, since a year after he started the project," Hartman said. "When I first got here all I saw at the entrance of the property was this tremendous pile of soil, mud really, and Steve walking out of the forest looking like a mud person with twigs coming out of his hair. He started talking about golf carts going through the forest, and I thought, 'Yeah right, buddy.' About a year later I saw what he was talking about and that it was going to happen."

From 1994-98, Bowhay and a skeleton crew of six to 12 people excavated and plowed through thousands of tons of mud, often trying to distribute it uphill. Today the gardens have a staff of 30 during the summer season.

"None of us have degrees; we learn as we go," said tour guide Loretta Palmer. "It's such a learning experience being here. And it's so nice to come to work loving what you do."

Hartman said he hopes they are creating something for the tourists to enjoy but, more importantly, that local people can enjoy.

Juneau resident Diana Scheel said she came to the gardens to escape a stressful day at work. When she goes back to work tomorrow she'll have "someplace to go back to in my mind," she said.

"It's just overwhelmingly beautiful," said Juneau resident Carol Geanoulis. "It smells wonderful. You just never get filled up with it."

Bowhay said comments from locals and tourists are what keep him going and make it worth it.

"Tourism is a competitive business," he said. "But you know you take the helicopter tours - green trees, beautiful - you take the ship tours - green trees, beautiful. But in a golf cart you get to be right in the heart of it. There is a whole world that exists within an inch of the dirt. There is a whole world six inches from the trees. If you really want to know it, you have to get right in there."

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