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**Betty Ford Alpine Gardens involved
in conservation efforts at Roan Plateau**

*America's highest botanical garden working
with BLM to protect two rare flowers*

VAIL, Colo. (Sept 4, 2007) — Building on its acclaim as a popular summer attraction in the Colorado High Country, America's highest botanical garden is playing an important role as research laboratory, as well.

Betty Ford Alpine Gardens, recognized as the foremost authority on high-altitude plants in natural and cultivated landscapes in the Rocky Mountains, not only provides an environment for rare, exotic and imperiled alpine wildflowers and plants, it also contributes staff and expertise essential to conservation efforts throughout the region.

"Betty Ford Alpine Gardens is more than pretty flowers," says Nicola Ripley, the Gardens' director of horticulture and vice president of the American Public Gardens Association. "Botanical gardens, in general, are essential in finding out how some plants grow, so we can protect their species."

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.

Since 2002, Ripley also has worked closely with the of Bureau Land Management to study plant life on the Roan Plateau, a mountainous area about 100 miles west of Vail prized not only for its remote backcountry, but also for its rich energy reserves. Ripley is working closely with the BLM's Colorado State Office botanist and its Glenwood Springs Field Office ecologist to study the characteristics of two rare plant species, the Parachute penstemon, *Penstemon debilis*, and the Debeque milkvetch, *Astragalus debequaeus*.

The Parachute penstemon has been nominated as a candidate for federal listing as an endangered species; it is found on the sparsely vegetated, steep white shale slopes of the Roan Plateau. Colonies of the Debeque milkvetch are found on the valley floor of the Colorado River Valley in Mesa and Garfield counties, near the town of Debeque. The

BLM is protecting the plants on its land on the Roan Plateau where the plants are found by not allowing surface-disturbing activities.

Ripley travels to the Roan Plateau regularly to monitor the flowers, and she's planted specimens at Betty Ford Alpine Gardens, in Vail's Ford Park, in specially created habitats that simulate conditions there.

"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. When people read about approval of natural gas drilling on the Roan Plateau, perhaps they'll remember these two rare flowers."

Carol Dawson, a botanist with the BLM who initiated the partnership with Betty Ford Alpine Gardens, says Ripley's work has been important in supporting the bureau's multiple-use mandate to manage public lands for future generations. Botanic gardens play a very important role in promoting a better understanding and appreciation for plants.

"We want to be good stewards. These rare plants are on BLM land, and we want to be proactive in protecting their numbers," Dawson says. "Nicola and the Betty Ford Alpine Gardens are working with us to get the word out to the public about the value of these plants."

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 mission is to inspire passion for plants in high-altitude communities through beautification, conservation, education and research programs.

A 501(c)(3) nonprofit organization for which operations and programs are funded entirely through the generosity of donors, Betty Ford Alpine Gardens also plays an important role in encouraging summertime flower displays throughout the Vail Valley at both private homes and businesses.

For more information on the Betty Ford Alpine Gardens, visit www.bettyfordalpinegardens.org.

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Media contact:
Stephen Lloyd Wood, media liaison
(970) 949-9774
press@bettyfordalpinegardens.org

*Note: Photos of *Penstemon debilis* and *Astragalus debequaeus*, as well as others of Betty Ford Alpine Gardens, are available upon request — SLW.*