

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE



Vail's Helen Fritch to receive first-ever Spirit of Betty Ford Award

VAIL, Colo. (July 20, 2006) — One of the Vail Valley's most inspirational leaders is being honored next month with a newly created award from the Betty Ford Alpine Gardens.

Helen Fritch, founder, longtime Gardens president and board member, a 32-year Vail resident — and a lifelong gardener — will receive the first-ever Spirit of Betty Ford Award during the nonprofit organization's annual gala dinner and dance on Sunday evening, Aug. 6, on the lawn at Betty Ford Alpine Gardens, in Vail's Ford Park.

"Like Betty, Helen always has been an independent woman who strongly supports what she believes in," says Jim Brandmeyer, the Gardens' executive director. "Helen's spirit is invaluable. There simply wouldn't be a Betty Ford Alpine Gardens without her."

Fritch came to Vail from Illinois in 1974 with her husband, Bob, building the Sitzmark Lodge, in Vail Village, which they still own and manage. She founded the Vail Alpine Garden Foundation in 1985 with her friend and fellow gardener, Marty Jones, with a mission to "promote harmony between plants and people in our mountain environments."

While Jones went to work designing a small Alpine Display Garden on land near the Gerald R. Ford Amphitheater, donated by the Vail Valley Foundation, Fritch organized a board of directors and raised "seed money" for bigger and better projects. Betty Ford turned the first shovel for the larger Mountain Perennial Garden in the spring of 1988; the two gardens were formally dedicated to the former first lady on Aug. 11, 1989.

Today, the Betty Ford Alpine Gardens — the highest botanical garden in the world, at 8,200 feet above sea level — attract an estimated 50,000 visitors annually.

"To me, the spirit is all about Vail, caring for Vail, doing things to promote Vail," says Fritch, a former Vail Valley Citizen of the Year. "My biggest reward is watching the Gardens grow."

The first annual Spirit of Betty Ford Award Gala, Aug. 6, begins with a reception at 6 p.m. "A Tribute to Helen Fritch," produced by EEF Productions, begins at 7:15 p.m., with dinner and dancing to follow. President Gerald Ford and Betty Ford are expected to attend.

Tickets for individual seats and group tables are available at the Betty Ford Alpine Gardens, at Alpine Treasures in Vail Village, and at the Gardens' booth at the Vail Farmers Market on Sundays.

The Betty Ford Alpine Gardens is a 501(c)(3) nonprofit organization for which operations and programs are funded entirely through the generosity of donors.

For more information, call 970-476-0103 or visit www.bettyfordalpinegardens.org.

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Note: Additional photos of Helen Fritch, Betty Ford and the Betty Ford Alpine Gardens are available upon request — SLW.