

SaanichNEWS

Tropical plants await life after Crystal Gardens

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Exotic collection thriving despite sudden death of BC Experience

Who would have guessed the plants from Crystal Garden would outlive the tourist attraction that replaced them?

As bankruptcy trustee Gene Drennan sorts through the BC Experience's assets, more than 4,000 exotic plants rescued from Crystal Garden occupy every available nook and cranny at Aviawest's Pacific Shore's Resort north of Parksville.

"We have some in our greenhouses, in our atrium, in our common areas. Our pool has a really high ceiling so some of the big ones are in there," said Lawrence Pearson, son of Aviawest principal Andrew Pearson.

When Crystal Garden closed just over two years ago to make way for the BC Experience, the developers of the ill-fated tourist attraction were planning to destroy the collection of plants.

But Andrew Pearson, a self-described plant lover, stepped in and offered to save them.

"They were just going to shred them," he said. "When we decided to save them, we had to dig them all out and spend a lot of money to store them."

Pearson's plan was, and still is, to move the collection into a 5,000 square-foot atrium planned for Aviawest's Parkside development at Blanshard Street and Fairfield Road.

However, delays in construction have forced the company to spend more than expected to warehouse the plants in the interim.

For the first 18 months, Aviawest stored the collection in a greenhouse in Cedar, just south of Nanaimo, paying about \$4,000 a month to heat the facility.

"It's cost us a fortune but we wanted to keep them intact," Lawrence Pearson said, adding that the company decided to save money by moving the plants to Pacific Shores.

BCNG Portals Page

Recently, Aviawest "repatriated" about 100 of the more fragile species, which the BC Experience developers initially stored at the Horticulture Centre of the Pacific in Saanich, planning to move them back into the tourist attraction after it opened.

However, work on the BC Experience also took longer than expected and staff at the Horticultural Centre could no longer afford to keep them.

"They gave us a generous donation of \$10,000 about two years ago," said Robyn Burton, the centre's executive director.

"We were supposed to keep them until January (2006) but it took longer than expected, so they extended the payment for another couple of months.

"From an expense standpoint, it didn't make sense for us to keep them long-term."

The plants, once moved into their new home, will provide a bit of living history recalling Crystal Garden's 30-year life as a conservation centre and a thematic connection between Pacific Shores and the Parkside in Victoria, Andrew Pearson said.

"I'm a plant lover and anyone who comes to Pacific Shores can see that. Rather than landscaping our resorts we try and garden our resorts," he said. "These plants will help provide a link between our operations."

In an odd twist, Aviawest has hired John Creviston, former curator of Crystal Garden Conservation Centre, as the company's director of sustainable development.

One of Creviston's tasks is to ensure the Crystal Garden plants are properly cared for until the Parkside opens.

Creviston lost his job when the conservation centre closed.