

## Jensen-Olson Arboretum in Juneau, Alaska

by Mary S. Chadduck



ALASKA IS a land of geographic superlatives—the biggest, the tallest, the coldest. But tucked within the temperate rainforest climate of Alaska's Inside Passage, a horticultural gem claims a more modest superlative. The youngest public garden in Alaska, the Jensen-Olson Arboretum (JOA) in Juneau is an expansive and idyllic garden. JOA, which opened in 2007, owes its existence to the vision of Caroline Jensen, a Master Gardener and longtime Juneau resident. Upon her death in 2006, Jensen donated the 14-acre site, which is located 23 miles north of downtown, to the city under the protection of a conservation easement stipulating that it be managed for biological diversity. She wanted it to

be a place for the people of Juneau that both “teaches and inspires learning in horticulture, natural sciences, and landscaping” and preserves “the beauty of the landscape for pure aesthetic enjoyment.”

### PRIME LOCATION FOR PRIMROSES

The property's picturesque location benefits from a mild micro-climate. Oriented to the south, the gently sloping site basks in the afternoon sun and warmth reflecting off the still water of the adjacent harbor. The tidal area's maritime climate and well-drained soil proved to be the perfect conditions for cultivating primroses (*Primula* spp.), a genus that Jensen loved. In addition to her primrose collection, she created three acres of gardens with both native and introduced species.

“It was basically a bush Alaska homestead,” says Merrill Jensen, JOA manager and horticulturist, who is not related to the former owner. “She rolled up her sleeves and took something that was pretty basic and waved a magic wand over the years and transformed it.”

Under Merrill Jensen's leadership, JOA's collection has expanded to include more than 200 *Primula* species and cultivars, a few of which are quite rare. In 2012, the American Public Gardens Association's Plant Collections Network designated it the largest documented collection of this genus in North America—quite an achievement for such a young garden. These primroses, now scattered throughout more than 40 beds, provide a welcome early-spring explo-

Among the many spectacular views at the Jensen-Olson Arboretum is this one of the Inside Passage and the snow-capped Chilkat Mountains.



JOA's extensive collection of primroses includes *Primula secundiflora*, above. Right: The flowers of *Meconopsis* 'Lingholm' add a splash of blue to the summer garden.



sion of color that continues until the end of summer. One of Merrill Jensen's favorites is *P. secundiflora*, an Asian species he admires for its “really cool black-and-white-striped calyx. The perfect little hoops face down and catch the raindrops,” he says.

### THEN AND NOW

Of course, the arboretum offers more than just primroses. Another significant feature is the large, 95-year-old **vegetable garden** that had been part of the original homestead and once helped feed the early gold miners. Vegetables of all kinds thrive in the rich soil, and the ample harvests are donated to local food banks.

Along with the vegetable garden, JOA has added specialized gardens such as the **Alpine and Subalpine Garden**. This pocket-sized display of plants from the surrounding alpine areas allows visitors to encounter plants normally found at much higher elevations. The nearby **Bog Garden** showcases carnivorous beauties such as sundews (*Drosera* spp.) and butterworts (*Pinguicula* spp.).

The arboretum boasts several trees estimated to be about a century old, including an apple tree planted by the original homesteaders. Unfortunately, some of these venerable trees have been badly damaged by bears, so the JOA has



The thriving vegetable garden has been in continuous production for nearly a century.

### Additional Information

**Jensen-Olson Arboretum**, 23035 Glacier Highway, Juneau, AK 99801. (907) 789-0139. [www.juneau.org/parkrec/arboretum](http://www.juneau.org/parkrec/arboretum).

- Hours: Open year round, Wednesday–Sunday, 9 a.m.–5 p.m.
- Admission: Free.

Other nearby sites to explore:  
**Mendenhall Glacier**, Juneau, AK. (907) 789-0097. [www.mendenhallglacier.net](http://www.mendenhallglacier.net).  
**Glacier Gardens**, Juneau, AK. (907) 790-3377. [www.glacierygardens.com](http://www.glacierygardens.com).  
**Alaska State Museum**, Juneau, AK. (907) 465-2901. <http://museums.alaska.gov>.

been diversifying its collection with new trees and shrubs whenever it has to replace an older specimen.

Plans are also underway to build a new indoor educational facility, complete with a botanical library.

### MORE SUPERLATIVES TO COME

The future will undoubtedly hold more superlatives for the youngest arboretum with the largest primrose collection. As Merrill Jensen says, it is “the most stunning location for a public garden anywhere.”

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