



como friends
THRIVE ON

Spring 2026 | Volume 28 | Number 2

INSIDER



The Magic of Como
Como's horticultural staff gets creative with a full year of themed flower shows

Photo by Susannah Baudhuin

| Save the date for our biggest fundraising event of the summer, Sunset Affair, on Thursday, July 16, 2026! |

CONTENTS INSIDER



Members Get More! | 4



Sparky's Biggest Fan | 6



The Magic of Como | 8



Como Friends Gift Shop | 12

HOW TO REACH US

Como Friends: 651.487.8229
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COMO PARK ZOO & CONSERVATORY

SUMMER HOURS: (May 1 – September 7) 10 am – 6 pm
 WINTER HOURS: (September 8 – April 30) 10 am – 4 pm



1225 Estabrook Drive | St. Paul, MN 55103 | 651.487.8229
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Como Friends is a nonprofit 501(c)3 organization whose mission is to inspire community generosity in support of Como Park Zoo and Conservatory so it thrives for generations to come.

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COMO PARK
ZOO & CONSERVATORY

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Como Park Zoo and Conservatory's mission is to inspire our public to value the presence of living things in our lives.

Como Park Zoo and Conservatory is accredited by the Association of Zoos and Aquariums (AZA). Look for the AZA logo whenever you visit a zoo or aquarium as your assurance that you are supporting a facility dedicated to providing excellent care for animals, a great experience for you, and a better future for all living things.



The American Public Gardens Association (APGA) serves and strengthens public gardens throughout North America by supporting and promoting their work, value and achievements in horticultural display, education, research and plant conservation.



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COMO FRIENDS INSIDER

ART DIRECTION & DESIGN: Susannah Baudhuin
EDITOR: Laura Billings Coleman | **PRINTING:** Dolan Printing

COMO NEWS & EVENTS



JOIN US FOR A FUN NIGHT WITHOUT THE CROWDS OR KIDS: BUY YOUR COMO AFTER HOURS TICKETS TODAY

Tuesday, May 19, 2026 | 6:30 PM – 8:30 PM

See Como in a whole new light—without the crowds or kids! Kick off the start of spring at Como Friends' adults-only (21+) fundraiser, a casual night of grown-up fun for a great cause. Scan the QR code or visit comofriends.org to learn more.

Thank You to Our Partners

LANCER

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INTERESTED IN BECOMING A CORPORATE PARTNER TO COMO FRIENDS IN SUPPORT OF COMO PARK ZOO & CONSERVATORY?

For more information on corporate partnerships, contact **Caroline Mehlhop**, Director of Institutional Partnerships and Events, at caroline.mehlhop@comofriends.org or call 651-487-8235.



NOW HIRING AT THE COMO FRIENDS GIFT SHOP

Are you an animals, plants, and people person? If so, you may have just the right stuff to join our retail team at Como. Apply to become a sales associate this summer at Como Friends' fantastic gift shop, where proceeds help to support the plants and animals you love. Scan the QR code above.



LEAVE A LEGACY TO PRESERVE COMO'S HISTORY AND PROTECT ITS FUTURE

Founded more than a century ago, Como Park Zoo & Conservatory is a gift that keeps on giving. Leave a legacy to preserve Como's tradition of free admission and family-friendly programs by including Como Friends in your estate plan. Gifts of all sizes can make a big difference at Minnesota's most visited cultural destination.

For more information on planned giving, contact **Laurel Lundberg**, Director of Individual Giving, at laurel.lundberg@comofriends.org or call 651-487-8296.



MEMBERS GET MORE AT COMO!

Did you know your Como Friends membership unlocks deals and discounts all year long? Carry your card with you this season for these cool Como perks:



NEW THIS SPRING! Get 10 percent off when you celebrate your next birthday at Como. Reach out to comoeducation@ci.stpaul.mn.us to book your party.



Invitations to Special Access Events like the Blaze Sparky Show this May, the January Orchid Show, and the Holiday Shopping and Marjorie McNeely Conservatory Sunken Garden Holiday Show.



Enjoy 15 percent off every purchase at the Como Friends Gift Shop and kiosks throughout Como, including the gift shop in Como Town.

Get 10 percent off tuition for education programs like Camp Como, featuring immersive week-long summer camp experiences for kids from preschool through 6th grade.

Take advantage of free or reduced admission to hundreds of partner zoos, aquariums, and botanical gardens when you travel this summer through the Association of Zoos and Aquariums and the American Horticultural Society reciprocal admissions programs.



Take a whirl through Como Town Amusement Park this summer with a 40-point Fun Card when you join Como Friends at the Supporter level.

Thank you to our partners at Lancer Hospitality for providing Fun Cards!

Ready for more? Renew your membership at comofriends.org or by calling Individual Giving Manager Kate Aksadi at 651-487-8264.

MARK YOUR COMO CALENDAR



APR

PARTY FOR THE PLANET | SATURDAY AND SUNDAY, APRIL 25 AND 26

The journey that monarchs, songbirds, and other global pollinators make back to Minnesota every spring is the inspiration for this year's Party for the Planet, a two-day Earth Day festival powered by Xcel Energy. This free conservation weekend has something for the whole family, with fun hands-on activities for kids, and great tips about sustainable gardening and lawn care for the grownups.

Special Conservation Weekend Powered by



COMO FRIENDS GIFT SHOP BULB SALE | MONDAY, APRIL 27

Bring some of the beauty of Como to your own backyard this season! Como Friends' annual bulb sale is about to pop up again on April 27, with a diverse array of spring bulbs previously featured in the Marjorie McNeely Conservatory's Spring Flower Show. Bring your own bag to the south side of the Conservatory for your pick of beautiful spring bulbs, while supplies last.

MAY

MOTHER'S DAY BONSAI SHOW | SATURDAY AND SUNDAY, MAY 9 AND 10

For more than 50 years, members of the Minnesota Bonsai Society have been cultivating many of the state's best bonsai, creating mindful miniature potted trees that captivate. Come and see some of the best from their members' private collections—as well as the Marjorie McNeely Conservatory's own masterpieces—during Como's annual Mother's Day Bonsai Show.

COMO AFTER HOURS | TUESDAY, MAY 19

See Como in a whole new light—without the crowds or kids! Kick off the start of spring at Como Friends' adults-only (21+) fundraiser, a casual night of grown-up fun for a great cause.

The Charlotte Partridge Ordway Japanese Garden will open on April 24.

SPECIAL ACCESS EVENT: THE BLAZE SPARKY SHOW | SATURDAY, MAY 30, 2026 | 9:00 AM – 10:00 AM

A Minnesota tradition since 1956, Sparky's return is one of the first signs of summer. Come see the Blaze Sparky Show on May 30 during a Special Access Event exclusively for Como Friends supporters. With fascinating facts from Como's aquatics keepers, and splashy behavior from all of Como Harbor's pinnipeds, it's a great way to dive into summer. RSVP to 651-487-8229 today!

JUL

SAVE THE DATE FOR SUNSET AFFAIR | THURSDAY, JULY 16

Mark your calendar to celebrate "the Magic of Como" at Como Friends' Sunset Affair on Thursday, July 16. With an amazing silent auction, colorful conversations with Como's keepers and horticulturists, and the magical vibe of Minnesota's most visited cultural destination, the summer's hottest ticket is the coolest way to support the amazing animals, plants, and people at Como. Watch your inbox for our announcement of live ticket sales.

Also starting May 1, 2026, Como Park Zoo & Conservatory and the Como Friends Gift Shop will change to Summer Hours—open daily from 10:00 AM to 6:00 PM.

Remember to sign up for our monthly Como Promo e-newsletter at comofriends.org and follow us on social media for the most up-to-date information!



SPARKY'S BIGGEST FAN



For Blaze Credit Union CEO Dan Stoltz, supporting Como Park Zoo & Conservatory is all about making Minnesotans' lives better

Meeting Sparky the sea lion is a memory that connects Minnesotans of all ages. Ever since Archie Brand's seal training show made its debut at Como Zoo in 1956, the splashy aquatics show has been a fixture at Como, evolving through seven decades (and seven different Sparkys) to reflect an ever-deepening understanding of the fierce intelligence, fascinating behavior, and natural adaptations that make marine mammals so amazing.



As Sparky and all the inhabitants of Como Harbor get set to dive into Como Zoo's busy spring and summer season, Como Friends talked with one of her biggest fans, Dan Stoltz, the CEO of Blaze Credit Union, the member-owned cooperative that's been the corporate sponsor of the Blaze Sparky Show since 2022.

Tell us your own Como story. Did you visit when you were a kid?

Como is a really special place for me. I have so many great memories of my mom and dad putting us kids in the car to visit Como Zoo, getting up close to the animals, having a family picnic on the grounds, and seeing the Sparky Show, of course. Growing up on the East Side of St. Paul, Como was an affordable place where we could come and have an awesome day. Now I'm blessed to have 11 grandchildren and we still come here regularly. I love seeing it all through their eyes now.

How did you become a Como Friends supporter?

Being involved in the community is something that came from my upbringing, and the idea that life's about giving, not getting. That's something we believe in at Blaze, really leaning into organizations that are impactful and influential in our community. Through friends, my wife and I started coming to the Sunset Affair gala and getting to know more about what was happening here. The fact that Como is free is important to this community. But the fact that it's free and a first-class organization is what's really amazing. That's why they need local businesses and corporations to step up and say, "We want to be part of that." When the opportunity to support the Sparky the sea lion show came up, it was one of the easiest decisions I've ever made in my career. It was just a perfect marriage.

Why was that? What about Como's mission resonated so much with you?

Many companies have really long mission statements and value statements, but ours is two words: Better lives. Our core mission is not about making more money, it's not about being the biggest, we just want to help make people's lives better every day. That's what Como Park Zoo & Conservatory does every day—it's about bettering Minnesotans' lives. You see it every time you visit, the diversity here, people of all ages, and



from all walks of life, from the metro area, or from outside of it. Como just feels like a place that really pulls us all together.

Corporate sponsorships are an obvious benefit for nonprofits like Como Friends, but how do they benefit businesses like yours?

Putting on my CEO hat here for a second, we just feel like it's a duty of organizations and businesses to give back to the communities that they serve. It is a pay-it-forward commitment, and so we as a company are always looking for organizations that are really making large impacts on people's lives and Como Park Zoo & Conservatory checked all of those boxes. On the promotional side, we want Blaze to be seen investing visibly in things that matter, but that's not because we expect an immediate return on investment. But I think there is a kind of respect that comes from the public when they see that your business is investing in the community and doing things for the right reasons. All generations care about this, but it seems to be especially true with the younger generation, who are looking to do business with companies that really care.

Como is nearly 130 years old, and the Sparky the sea lion tradition goes back nearly 70 years. What do you think keeps people coming back?

I think it's that anyone can visit, any day, any time. In the economy right now, the two key words are volatility and uncertainty. But at Como, you can count on it. When you walk into the Zoo to see the animals, or visit the Conservatory to see the gardens, you just know it's going to be a great experience.

THE MAGIC OF COMO

Como's horticultural staff gets creative with a full year of themed flower shows

Ray Watson, the Marjorie McNeely Conservatory's new horticultural curator, takes a storytelling approach to plants, and for this season's Spring Flower Show, they're finding inspiration in an ancient tale of love, loss, and renewal—the Greek goddess Persephone. Maiden of flowers, queen of the underworld, and goddess of new growth, Persephone's story is so strongly rooted in the rebirth of spring that Watson couldn't resist using this Greek myth as the creative spark for their first seasonal flower show in the Sunken Garden.

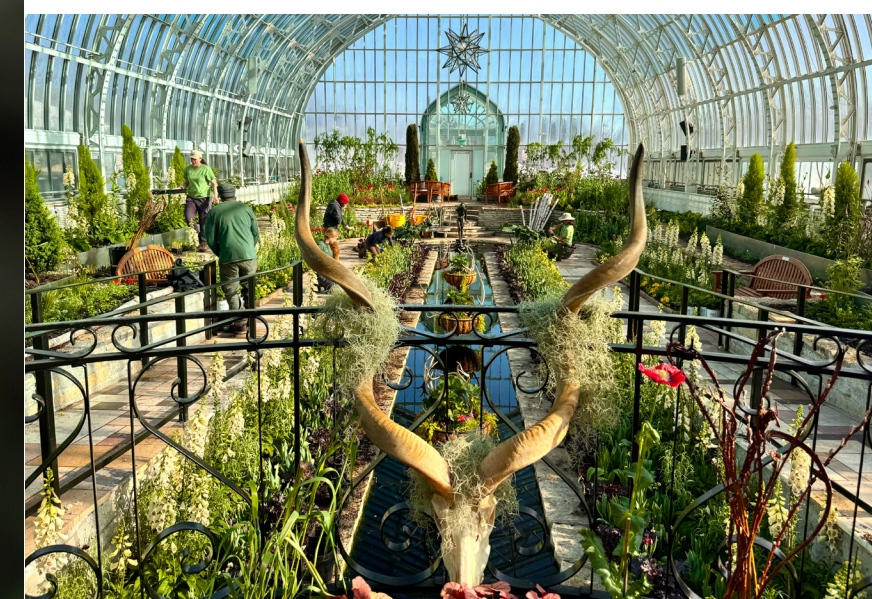
Bringing a sustainability-driven and artistic lens to the exhibition, Horticulturist Rylee Werden and Watson created a vision that pairs environmentally conscious practices with expressive planting design, and flower choices. Their work highlights innovative uses of seasonal materials, thoughtful resource stewardship, and immersive compositions that reframe the Sunken Garden as both a literary story and a living work of art.



"When you're designing for this room, having a theme is an interesting creative challenge that forces us to work within the constraints of the story we're trying to tell, and to narrow the plant options in a way that allows visitors the chance to really focus on some new and possibly unexpected choices," Watson says.

While the first half of the show, on display through April 26, features thousands of spring bulbs, it's also full of less traditional choices that help tell Persephone's story. For instance, the show features *Narcissus poeticus* daffodil, the intoxicating flower that Hades first uses to capture Persephone's attention and spirit her away to the underworld. Poppies, which flourish near wheat fields, symbolize Persephone's mother, Demeter, goddess of the harvest, who demands her daughter's return. Pomegranates create the seeds that Hades feeds to his new bride, trapping her in the underworld for part of the year, and returning her to her mother every spring, reviving the landscape and bringing life back to earth.

"Persephone's story is about the transition from the underworld and death, to the magical aspects of renewal and physical transformation that we start to see in the spring," Watson says. "I prefer art to have a narrative that explains what the creator wanted to show and tell, and with stories like these, there are so many aspects we can illustrate through our flower selection."



GROWING COLLABORATION

The spring show is the first in what will be a full year of seasonal flower shows all inspired by the "Magic of Como." From a fantastical Alice in Wonderland-inspired Summer Flower Show, to a mystical witch's garden planned for autumn, to a Holiday Flower Show inspired by the aurora borealis, Como's talented team of horticulturists are taking a more collaborative approach to design and planning in the Sunken Garden, which celebrates its 100th anniversary next year.

"Great ideas can come from everywhere, and over the last year, we've really opened that up within the horticulture department," says Watson, who has encouraged staff to find ways to highlight existing plant collections alongside new cultivars. "If someone comes forward to say, 'I have a great idea for a flower show,' we can pair them up with someone from our plant collections and someone from production to work together. We've also started using our rotating seasonal flower shows as a teaching tool, giving our horticultural apprentices the



Dressler, who once designed most of the flower shows herself, says the shift has helped to unlock a new level of excitement about each of the season's flower shows. "We're all plant lovers, and we want to surprise and delight other plant lovers, too," she says. "So while we're still creating flower shows, it's really fun to have something a little surprising or weird in these shows, that will make the plant people look twice."

Fleming, who supervises Como's outdoor gardens and arrangements, says it's a shift that Como visitors may notice on the grounds as well. "With more collaboration, we're looking at the way plants can be used indoors and outdoors. For instance, if we're planning on planting new shrubs outdoors, we might consider forcing shrubs that we could use first in the Sunken Garden and then move outside when the show is finished," she says. "I think visitors are noticing a greater mix in the plant palette, but also more creativity from the gardeners tending to those spaces."

In late March, this all-hands approach was in high relief as more than 15 gardeners, including Right Track apprentices Sophia, Leila, and Bela and 17 volunteers contributed upwards of 500 combined hours over four days to remove the previous floral show and install the poppies, pomegranates, and other plants intended for the Sunken Garden's Persephone show. "There is a bit of chaos," Watson admits. "There's always something happening. But at the end of the day, our job at the Marjorie McNeely Conservatory is to make joy, and that's not something you get to do everywhere. My first year here has been amazing for that exact reason."

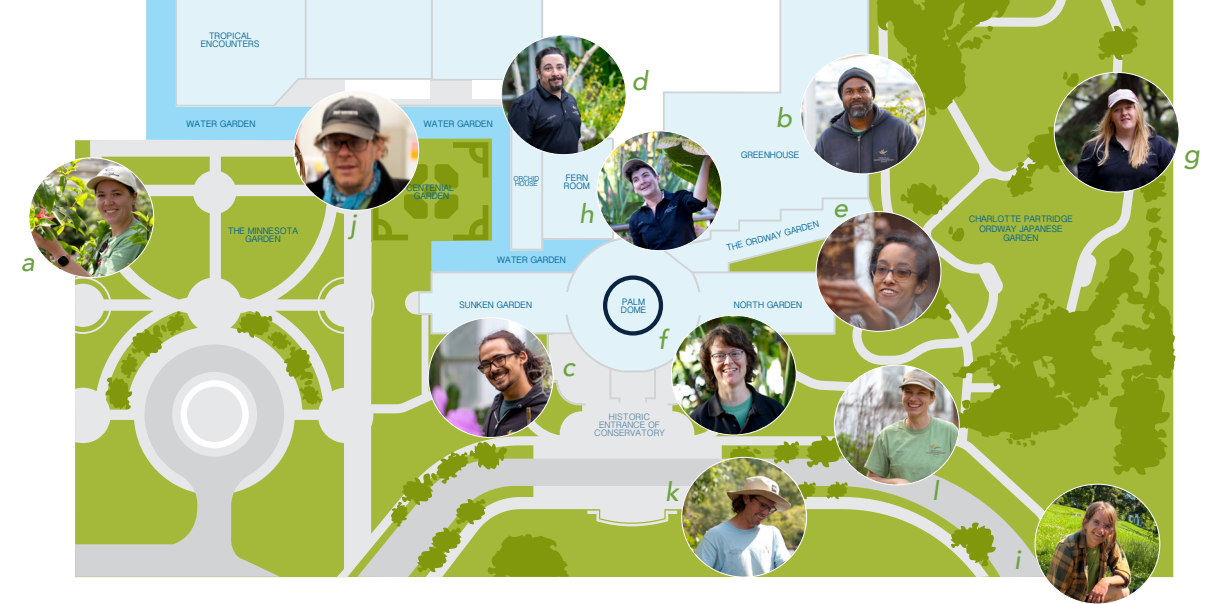
chance to co-create a show this summer as a way to learn about design and color and creativity and how to communicate your needs across departments to create something really special."

Building a collaborative horticultural team was one of Watson's goals in their first year at Como, a strategy that's also aimed at reducing waste, recycling more plant material, and cultivating the creative skills of Como's talented gardeners. "I would say it's been a very intentional integration of our varied groups within horticulture that helps with efficiency, but also helps with communication and creativity," Watson says, praising horticultural supervisors Ariel Dressler and Bryn Fleming for fostering a positive culture where gardeners can take risks and learn from mistakes. "Ariel and Bryn have done such a great job breaking down silos, identifying where people have passions, and giving them the freedom to express themselves."

Bryn Fleming

Ray Watson

Ariel Dressler



THE GREEN TEAM

With spring in the air, Como's gardens are more glorious than ever. Meet the horticulturists who make it all happen:

Ray | The Marjorie McNeely Conservatory's curator, Ray came to Como with a layered conservation background, with roles in education and youth engagement, agriculture and landscape design, and genomic research and COVID science.

Ariel | Horticultural supervisor and flower show designer, Ariel has led Como's shift from a top-down flower show model to a deeply collaborative process, cutting waste, stretching the budget, and encouraging more experimentation.

Bryn | The lead horticulturist behind all of the Marjorie McNeely Conservatory's outdoor gardens and displays, Bryn also works closely with Como Zoo keepers to protect the birds, reptiles, and fish that live in Tropical Encounters, while keeping the jungle vines and plants from taking over.

Rylee | A champion of native plants and beneficial bugs, Rylee's work with Integrated Pest Management has allowed Como to dramatically reduce chemical applications on plants. A passionate proponent of using natives in home gardens, Rylee's frequent gardener talks are full of great tips!

Bo | Como's greenhouse gatekeeper, Bo handles thousands of incoming plugs, giving them a preventive dip for bugs and disease prevention before they enter production. With big crops that include holiday poinsettias and spring bulbs, Bo also cultivates tiny but mighty collections of Minnesota native species and carnivorous plants.

Isaac | c With a strong design eye for color and floral arrangement, Isaac also brings deep experience and positive energy to working with student volunteers, interns, and RightTrack apprentices at the Conservatory.

Alejandro | d If you loved Como's contributions to the Winter Carnival Orchid Show, or the fresh new feel of the Palm Dome, you have Alejandro to thank. Using extra plants to create vivid vignettes, Alejandro is bringing more color to Como's historic collections.

Reva | e Como's resident bonsai guru, Reva has the rare ability to see what a tree will look like in five or ten years, training a single branch on some of Como's potted trees for years at a time. With specialized training that's taken her from Portland, Oregon, to Japan, Reva cares for a bonsai collection that's been named one of the best in the Midwest.

Jen | f Showcasing the connections between plants and people is the narrative of Como's North Garden, an ethnobotanical space that's critical to many of Como's education programs. With her background in anthropology and interpretation, Jen is a great ambassador for what makes plants so amazing, helping visitors see when important plants in her collection are about to bloom.

Jess | g Japanese garden specialist Jess has been part of the Charlotte Partridge Ordway Japanese Garden's stunning transformation, revealing the original intention of Nagasaki landscape architect Masami Matsuda. With a background in garden design, she frames picturesque scenes with precise lines in this treasured corner of Como.

Victoria | h Lead horticulturist in the Marjorie McNeely Conservatory's Fern Room, Victoria is often seen in her hip waders knee-deep in Como's water gardens, which she also manages. Passionate about public engagement, she promotes gardener talks and conservation projects, including a Como Friends Conservation Champions project that highlighted the beauty and biodiversity of Minnesota's bogs.

Marie | i The designer behind Como's seasonal Gates Ajar mosaiculture, Marie keeps this century-old Como floriculture tradition looking fresh every summer. In the Minnesota Garden, her work helps drive the move away from monocultures toward more colorful, ecologically rich plantings.

John | j Como's new lily pond specialist, John propagates and cares for Como's aquatic crops while experimenting with new ways to design in and around the Conservatory's gorgeous seasonal water gardens.

Jake | k Another water garden collaborator, Jake also designed the meadow garden around the Frog Pond, turning a steep, high-maintenance mowed slope into a wildflower meadow with mown paths and seating spots that frame the best views. Check it out this season!

Robin | l Como's newest outdoor gardener, Robin is learning the full landscape at Como, underscoring the Conservatory's new strategic approach to sharing knowledge and seeing the whole system, not just one assigned garden or collection.



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Phone: 651.487.8222
comofriends.org



Buzz-Worthy Gifts for Pollinator Lovers

Celebrate the magic of pollinators with a charming collection of gifts at the Como Friends Gift Shop! From cozy butterfly socks and stylish tees to adorable bumblebee-themed treasures and nature-inspired décor for your home, there's something for every garden enthusiast. Treat your sweet tooth, too, with delicious honey candies that capture the essence of nature's hardest workers. Every item is a delightful way to show your love for the tiny heroes that keep our world blooming.

Remember, Como Friends members enjoy 15 percent off every purchase!

