



como friends
THRIVE ON

Summer 2025 | Volume 27 | Number 3

INSIDER



Bromellads in Bloom
*One of the Marjorie McNeely
Conservatory's most interesting
plant collections plays the
starring role in this season's
Summer Flower Show*

Photo by Susannah Baudhuin

| Join us in welcoming Katie Hill as Como Friends' new president! |

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HOW TO REACH US

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Volunteer Services: 651.487.8252
Rentals: 651.487.8250

COMO PARK ZOO & CONSERVATORY

Summer Hours: (May 1 – September 30) 10 am – 6 pm
Winter Hours: (October 1 – 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

1225 Estabrook Drive | St. Paul, MN 55103
www.comozooconservatory.org

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.



DIRECTOR OF PARKS AND RECREATION: Andy Rodriguez

COMO FRIENDS INSIDER

Art Direction & Design: Susannah Baudhuin
Editor: Laura Billings Coleman | **Printing:** Dolan Printing

COMO NEWS & EVENTS



**A CRISP FALL DAY FOR A
CONSERVATION ADVENTURE!**
Como Quest coming Friday, October 17, 2025
9:00 AM – 11:30 AM

Make a plan for MEA weekend and bring the whole family to Como Quest! This unique family-friendly fundraiser is a wild exploration designed for multigenerational fun, where kids and adults work together to unlock conservation clues and uncover exciting new secrets about animals, plants, and the planet we share. **Tickets coming soon. Watch your inbox!**

LEARN HOW YOU CAN SUPPORT COMO THROUGH CORPORATE PARTNERSHIPS AND SPONSORSHIPS

Partnering in support of Como Park Zoo & Conservatory through corporate partnerships and sponsorships is a meaningful way for businesses to demonstrate their commitment to conservation, education, and cultural access. These collaborations help create engaging experiences that bring people together while directly supporting the animals, gardens, and programs that make Como a cherished community treasure. We're proud to work with organizations that share in this mission and help ensure that Como remains free and accessible for all.

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



SUNSET AFFAIR

Thursday, July 17, 2025 | 5:30 PM – 10:00 PM

Tickets to Como Friends' annual gala on July 17 are going fast! Call 651-487-8229 to reserve your place at the summer's hottest fundraiser, benefiting the animals, plants, and people that connect through Como Park Zoo & Conservatory.

If you can't make it, you can still support Como's critical work with a gift to the Sunset Affair Fund-A-Mission, which will be matched, dollar for dollar, up to \$75,000 through a generous gift from the Manitou Fund. Help Como elevate animal care, cultivate gorgeous public gardens, protect free admission, and serve the next generation with a gift on Como Friends' Sunset Affair page or by phone at 651-487-8229.



Thank you to our amazing sponsors!



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SPONSOR COMO ZOO'S PRICKLIEST PAIR

In spite of their prickly nature, Copper and Russet, Como Zoo's new African crested porcupines, have been charming keepers and visitors alike since their arrival this spring. Help support them in their new home in Como's Large Cats building by becoming a Como Friends animal sponsor. For a limited time, this specially priced sponsorship package includes two

mini porcupine plush, a certificate of sponsorship, and an animal fact sheet. A great gift for the animal lover in your life—buy yours while supplies last!

Sponsor the porcupines or any of Como Zoo's animals at comofriends.org or by calling Individual Giving Manager Kate Aksadi at 651-487-8264.



LEAVE A LEGACY BY SUPPORTING COMO'S FUTURE

A Minnesota tradition for more than 125 years, coming to Como Park Zoo & Conservatory is a memory that connects across generations. Help make history this year by making a planned gift to support the animals, plants, and people that connect every day of the year 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 651-487-8296.



JOIN US IN WELCOMING KATIE HILL TO COMO FRIENDS

Como Friends' board of directors is pleased to announce the appointment of Katie Hill as its next president, effective July 14, 2025. Hill succeeds Jackie Sticha, whose 25 years of visionary leadership transformed Como Friends into a nationally recognized model for public-private partnership and helped secure a vibrant, accessible future for Como Park Zoo & Conservatory.

The former vice president of engagement and chief innovation officer at Milkweed Editions, Hill has consistently reimaged how the public connects with such treasured civic institutions as the Walker Art Center and the Minneapolis Institute of Art.

"Katie brings a rare blend of creativity, strategy, and heart," says Andy Davis, board chair of Como Friends. "She understands what it means to lead with purpose and partnership. Her deep roots in the Twin Cities, her passion for equity and access, and her track record of innovation make her exactly the right leader to guide Como Friends into its next chapter."

A lifelong Saint Paul resident and longtime Como champion, Hill brings a personal commitment to Como's future. "Como is where I bring my kids to explore, reflect, and recharge. It's not just a place—it's a living ecosystem of wonder, learning, and belonging," she says. "I'm honored to join Como Friends at this important moment and excited to reimagine how communities connect with public cultural spaces."

Prior to joining Milkweed Editions—a nationally respected independent publisher of literary fiction, nonfiction, and poetry—Hill spent more than a decade in art museum communications, digital strategy, and public engagement. She launched her career in innovation as creator of the first Internet Cat Video Film Festival at the Walker Art Center in 2012. Hill moved on to help launch the practice of audience engagement at the Minneapolis Institute of Art, where she



headed the engagement strategy department and oversaw the marketing operation. Hill holds a BA in English language and literature from Kenyon College, and an MA in art history from the University of St. Thomas.

Selected after an extensive search conducted by Ballinger | Leafblad, Hill will join Como Friends in July. Como Friends supporters will have their first chance to connect with Hill on July 17 at Sunset Affair, the organization's annual summer gala. The nonprofit fundraising partner to Como Park Zoo & Conservatory, Como Friends has delivered more than \$52 million in private contributions to Minnesota's most visited cultural destination, safeguarding the free admission policy Como's 1.9 million annual visitors value.

If you've been to a Blaze Sparky Show at Como Zoo, you know that sea lions like Sparky are capable of some amazing feats, from diving nearly 60 stories below the ocean's surface, to holding their breath for up to 20 minutes at a time.

But some of the adaptations that work swimmingly in the sea can make veterinary care very complicated for seals and sea lions, particularly when it comes to anesthesia and other medical interventions. "They're so trainable and willing to participate in their own health care that you can accomplish quite a lot when they're awake," says Como Zoo veterinary technician Andrea Persson. "But it can be much trickier when they're sick and need to be immobilized, in part because of the dive response that allows them to conserve oxygen and also because we just don't have to do it very often."

That's why Persson recently traveled to Sausalito, California, to attend an intensive veterinary training program at the Marine Mammal Center, the largest marine mammal teaching hospital in the country. Made possible by a grant from Como Friends' Conservation Champions program, the five-day program allowed Persson to support the Center's work, rehabilitating stranded seals and sea lions, while learning veterinary tips and tricks from experts who provide daily care to more than 80 elephant seals, harbor seals, and sea lions.

"Part of their mission is to expand the number of veterinary professionals that are equipped to deal with seals and sea lions, and it was a great opportunity for me to get concentrated hands-on experience," says Persson, who cares for hundreds of different species at Como Zoo as part of her work with Como's new on-site veterinary team. "One of my main objectives



PROTECTING PINNIPEDS

was to become proficient in blood collection. Blood samples are very important in providing information on the health of the animals we care for and with our relatively small population of seals at the zoo I had limited opportunities to refine my venipuncture techniques. It was great to be able to collect blood on multiple animals each day while I was at the Marine Mammal Center and I am now very confident in my ability to collect blood from our seals and sea lions at the zoo."

Aquatic animals keeper Kelley Dinsmore says immersive field experiences like this have been invaluable to building the professional expertise of Como keepers and veterinarians. Through Como Friends' Conservation Champions program, Dinsmore was able to take part in a penguin rehabilitation program in South Africa,

while aquatics team members Becky Sievers and Julie Yarrington took part in seal and sea lion rehabilitation efforts in Santa Barbara. "Hands-on experience at places like the Marine Mammal Center, with blood draws and other medical procedures, increases the proficiency of our staff—zookeepers and vet staff alike," Dinsmore says. "It definitely helps increase the quality of care."

Field experiences also give Como's animal care professionals firsthand experience of the conservation challenges faced by partner organizations committed to protecting animals. The Marine Mammal Center, for instance, has rescued more than 26,000 marine animals along 600 miles of California coastline and in Hawai'i since 1975, typically answering more than 10,000 distress calls about sick, injured, or entangled marine mammals every year.

During Persson's stay in April, the Center was providing safe harbor to dozens of orphaned elephant seal pups, which are born at about 75 pounds and weigh nearly 300 pounds just a month later when they're fully weaned from their mothers. In spite of their impressive size, young seals can often be separated prematurely when strong storms wash them off of beaches before they've learned how to survive on their own. Climate change makes the problem worse, as rising sea level and storm surges are more likely to sweep mothers and pups away from each other.

Distressed elephant seal pups are routinely rehabilitated at the Marine Mammal Center, but before they can be returned to the ocean, they need to be taught how to eat an adult diet of fish, squid, krill, and algae. "But you have to do it in such a way that you're not habituating them to people," says Persson. "It's very difficult to get them to eat, because if they get even a little bit of water in their mouth with the fish, they don't know what to do and they start gagging."

The time Persson spent with pinniped pups may soon come in handy thanks to a new breeding recommendation for Como Zoo's Atlantic gray seals, Wally and Medusa. And getting the chance to see wild harbor seals and sea lions on the California coast gave her even more appreciation for the species. "I would say the whole experience was invaluable, and gave me so many ideas to bring back to Como Zoo to improve care for our animals," says Persson. "I'm very grateful."

Private contributions from people like you are critical to support conservation efforts at Como Zoo and in the wild. Thank you!



Open every day of the year, and always free to every visitor, there are few destinations as inviting as Como. And thanks to your support this year, Como’s nearly two million annual visitors are finding even more resources to access, discover, and appreciate throughout Como Zoo and the Marjorie McNeely Conservatory.

“Accessibility can’t begin and end with Como’s free admission,” Laura Wake Wiesner, Visitor Services & Interpretive Programs Manager, says about the host of free programs and improvements visitors are discovering this season. “We also need to make sure that when folks get here, they can experience everything Como has to offer.” Here’s how:

Round-the-Clock Engagement | With the full return of Como’s pre-pandemic attendance in 2024, the time was right to expand the roster of free daily programs this summer, with up-close experiences with keepers, horticulturists, and interpretive staff that are scheduled nearly every half hour throughout the day. From the familiar favorites at the Blaze Sparky the Sea Lion Show (11:30 a.m. and 2:30 p.m. daily), to two new faces Russet and Copper, the featured players at Porcupine Time (2 p.m.), to perennials like the rotating Gardener Chat (1 p.m.) and Keeper Talk (11 a.m.), the goal is to invite visitors to get even closer to Como’s animals and plants.

Open Doors | Wayfinding at Como has been improved with new signage in multiple languages to meet the needs of a diverse community of visitors. ADA-accessible doors have also been upgraded, helping visitors with strollers, walkers, and other mobility aids move through campus more easily.

Water Garden Renewal | Como’s ever-popular Victoria water platters made a long-awaited return thanks to pool and plumbing repairs provided by your contributions to Como Friends. One of the most Instagrammable locations on Como’s campus also got a Minnesota makeover, with native aquatic plants that connect Como visitors to the wonders of the North Star State’s woods and waterways.

Ramping It Up | New ramps in the Sunken Garden have been getting rave reviews from visitors, with stone flooring that perfectly matches the historic feel of the room, and an easy grade that allows visitors with mobility chal-



lenges to circulate around the pool and back. “One of the things I like seeing in the Sunken Garden is that families don’t have to separate now, leaving behind a relative who might have trouble with the stairs,” says Wake Wiesner. “With the new ramps, the whole room is accessible, and gives families the chance to immerse themselves and experience Como all together.”

New Pathways | The Charlotte Partridge Ordway Japanese Garden was made for meandering, but with rocky pathways prone to washing out, accessibility was becoming a problem for many visitors. To solve it, support from a Como Friends donor helped pave the way with sturdier, stroller- and wheelchair-accessible pavement that visitors have enjoyed this Spring. Combined with a smoother approach between the Visitor Center and the Primates Building, your contributions are helping to ensure that no corner of Como’s historic campus is off limits for visitors with mobility challenges.

Privacy Pods | Como is such a busy place, it’s not always possible to find a quiet bench for nursing newborns. But thanks to a new lactation pod in the gateway between the Fern Room and the Palm Dome, young families can always find comfort and privacy as they tend to the needs of breastfeeding babies.

Bathroom Inclusion Project | With a core audience of young families, bathroom breaks also got a glow-up in 2024. Como’s public restrooms are now equipped with step stools and Koala Seats to help make trips to the bathroom a little easier for kids and their caregivers.

ROUND-THE-CLOCK AT COMO

What’s the best time of day to come to Como? With more than a dozen free daily programs offered throughout the summer, the answer is all the time, and again and again. As summer heats up, make the most of every visit to Como with this roster of family-friendly programs and special events, all free to every visitor.

Polar Bear Program | 10:30 a.m.

Stop by Polar Bear Odyssey to see how Nan, Neil, and Kulu connect with their trainers every day, splashing down in the pools, and sniffing out special enrichments in their habitat.

Zookeeper Talk | 11 a.m.

What’s it like to take care of the world’s most amazing animals? Ask one of Como’s zookeepers, who take turns sharing their behind-the-scenes insights about dozens of different animals at this daily event. Listen to Como’s public address announcements to find out where the day’s talk is taking place.

Blaze Sparky Show | 11:30 a.m. & 2:30 p.m.

A splashy Como tradition since 1956, the Sparky Show now highlights all of the pinnipeds that call Como Harbor home.

Fish Feeding in Tropical Encounters | Noon

Dive a little deeper into understanding the underwater world with this daily fish-feeding experience presented by Como’s interpretive staff.

Gardener Chat | 1 p.m.

What does it take to keep the Marjorie McNeely Conservatory growing? Find out at this engaging Q and A, featuring a new topic in gardening and plant care every day.

Gorilla Program | 1:30 p.m.

Meet the greatest of the apes face-to-face in Gorilla Forest, as primate keepers connect with Como’s western lowland gorillas, while exploring ways that you can help protect their wild cousins.

Porcupine Time | 2 p.m.

Como Zoo’s prickliest new arrivals, Russet and Copper, are the focus of this mid-day program, where you can learn all about the African crested porcupine.

Story Time | 3 p.m.

Take a break in Como’s Visitor Center to listen to a nature-themed story perfect for preschoolers and other young learners.

Tiger Talk | 3:30 p.m.

Tiger mom Bernadette and her twin cubs Maks and Marisa are the focus for this daily conversation, all about the care and feeding of Como’s large cats.

The Art of Bonsai | 4 p.m.

With one of the best collections of bonsai for public display in the Midwest, this daily program gives visitors the chance to learn more about the amazing trees in Como’s collection, and the history and philosophy of this ancient art form.

The Summer Flower Show at the Marjorie McNeely Conservatory typically features hundreds of tropical annuals that require warm temperatures, lots of water, and frequent swap-outs as they bloom and fade.

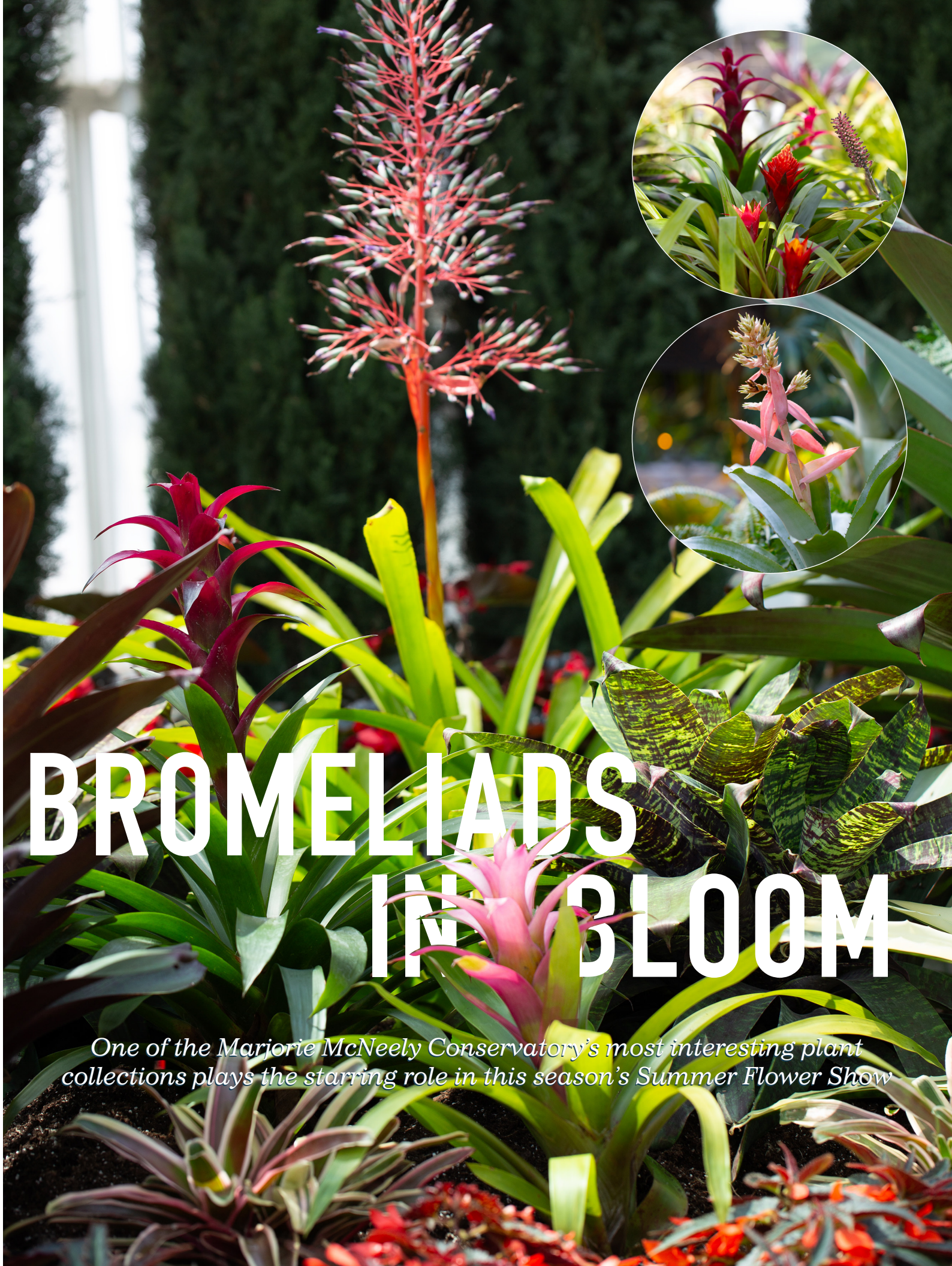
But this season, Como’s horticultural team decided to highlight a plant species that’s a little more sustainable, but no less sensational—the bromeliad.

“We’ve never used the Sunken Garden as a showcase room for a plant collection before, but we have such a variety of bromeliads currently,” says Como Senior Horticulturist Ariel Dressler. “We always want to put plants in a place where they’ll thrive and be happy, and since the Summer Flower Show is our longest show of the year, we know our bromeliads will do well. They’re such a charismatic plant that to see them in mass is a real treat.”

In fact, bromeliads have long been a favorite for Como visitors, who recently bestowed the “Cutest Plant” award on a tiny pineapple bromeliad at Bouquets. With a collection first launched in 1975, The Marjorie McNeely Conservatory currently has 638 living bromeliads in its collection, from 350 different species, the best of which are often displayed in the understory of the historic Palm Dome.

With more than 2,700 known species, the diversity of bromeliads is part of their wide appeal. Unlike other plants, bromeliads only use their roots for balance—all the water and nutrients they need are delivered through their leaves. And while many bromeliads only bloom once in their lifetimes, the mother plant can produce many new offshoots, known as “pups.”

To create the sheer number of plants needed for the Summer Flower Show display, horticulturist Diane Rafats and a dedicated team of volunteers propagated hundreds of bromeliad “pups” from Como’s own collection, timing their care and life cycle to ensure they were ready to bloom in time for the show, which runs from June 13 to September 14. Meanwhile, horticulturist Rylee Werden went about taking cuttings from Tropical Encounters and the North Garden to amass the hundreds of tropical accent plants that are also part of the display. Horticulturists worked to acclimate the plants to the unique conditions of the Sunken Garden prior to their June debut.



One of the Marjorie McNeely Conservatory’s most interesting plant collections plays the starring role in this season’s Summer Flower Show

“Taking divisions of plants requires a little recovery period, because sometimes plants can be a little dramatic or wilted,” says Werden. “We also give them a little bit of shade and cooler temperatures as they move their way into the Sunken Garden, where it’s going to be hot, but not quite as humid as in a misting tropical greenhouse. Our goal is to get them through that drama phase before they go into the show and are ready for that bright sun and heat.”

While visitors have been amazed by the unique vibe the bromeliads bring to Minnesota’s most beautiful room, Rafats reports that they’re more accessible than they look. “Their leaves can be sharp, so you do have to be careful, but otherwise, they make great houseplants.”

Speaking of houseplants, after the Summer Flower Show ends, our conservatory-grown bromeliads will be available for sale at Garden Safari Gifts in the Visitor Center!



Your support for Como Friends helps ensure the Marjorie McNeely Conservatory’s seasonal flower shows are always free to every visitor. Thank you!



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Hot Pink Summer at Garden Safari Gifts

With flamingo-themed camp shirts, coffee cups, baseball caps and more, Como Friends' Garden Safari Gifts is pretty in pink this season. Take a hint from the hottest hue in nature's palette to give yourself a glow-up this summer, with natural ingredient moisturizers, flamingo-covered cosmetics bags, and beachy decor. **Remember, Como Friends members enjoy 15 percent off every purchase to benefit the gorgeous gardens and fragrant flowers now on display at Como Park Zoo & Conservatory.**

