



como friends
THRIVE ON

Winter 2025 | Volume 27 | Number 1

INSIDER

Photo by Senior Keeper Jill Erzar

Hey Tiger!
*Face to face with some of
Como Zoo's newest arrivals*

| Como Park Zoo & Conservatory's Sunken Garden is now open—better than ever and more accessible to all! |

CONTENTS INSIDER



Fresh Starts | 6



Tortoise Tracking | 8



Down the Garden Path | 10



Garden Safari Gifts | 12

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COMO PARK ZOO & CONSERVATORY

Summer Hours: (April 1 – September 30) 10 am – 6 pm

Winter Hours: (October 1 – March 31) 10 am – 4 pm

Please note: all photos of Amur tiger cubs were taken by Senior Keeper Jill Erzar, and Large Cat Keepers Hans Jorgenson and Caitlin Allesli
Emperor tamarin photo taken by Primates Keeper Em Brunmeier



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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.



DIRECTOR OF PARKS AND RECREATION: Andy Rodriguez

COMO FRIENDS INSIDER

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COMO NEWS & EVENTS



BOUQUETS TICKETS ON SALE NOW

Thursday, February 27, 2025 | 7:00 PM – 9:30 PM

There's still time to plan a perfect mid-winter "get-away" at Bouquets, Como Friends' most spirited fundraiser. With tropical temperatures throughout the Marjorie McNeely Conservatory and extraordinary wine, beer and food pairings arranged in gorgeous garden settings, coming to Bouquets is a feast for the senses, and a fantastic date night idea. Visit comofriends.org/bouquets to reserve your tickets, where proceeds help to support the animals, plants and people that come together every day at Como Park Zoo & Conservatory.

Thank you Sponsors and Partners!



LANCER
hospitality group

Bouquets Plus



Bouquets General



Bouquets is just the start of Como Friends' social season in 2025. Be sure to save the dates to your right on your calendar for other ways to connect at Como.



COMO AFTER HOURS

Tuesday, May 20, 2025 | 6:30 PM – 8:30 PM

An after-hours adult event with a playful vibe, Como After Hours is a fun way to connect to Como without the crowds or the kids, and see Como in a new light!



SUNSET AFFAIR

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

Como Friends' summer fundraiser is the hottest ticket in town, with exceptional guest experiences and a can't-miss collection of silent auction treasures.



COMO QUEST

Friday, October 17, 2025 | 9:00 AM – 11:30 AM

A wild adventure perfect for multigenerational fun, bring the whole family to this unique benefit for Como Park Zoo & Conservatory.

Additional information on each event and links to purchase tickets can be found on the Como Friends website at comofriends.org/events.



TWO DECADES OF LEADERSHIP

Como Friends congratulates Como Park Zoo & Conservatory Director Michelle Furrer on her appointment as the next president and CEO of the Myriad Gardens Foundation and Scissortail Park Foundation in Oklahoma City, effective March 1, 2025.

Since joining Como in 2006 as its first-ever marketing manager, Furrer has been a part of Como’s success and growth. In 2009, she became director and has since guided Como through a period of growth and transformation. Under her leadership, supported by Como Friends, Como has completed major projects such as Gorilla Forest, Como Harbor, The Ordway Gardens, and Centennial Garden, while boosting earned revenue, enhancing visitor experiences, and achieving record-breaking attendance. Michelle’s leadership and commitment to connecting people with nature have helped ensure Como remains a vibrant, accessible destination for all.

“Como has been my home for nearly two decades, and it has been an incredible honor to lead this cherished institution,” Furrer says. “I am incredibly proud of what we’ve achieved together—from creating world-class exhibits to fostering deeper connections between our community and the natural world. While it’s bittersweet to say goodbye, I’m excited to begin this new chapter and bring my passion for urban green spaces to Myriad Gardens and Scissortail Park. Como will always have a special place in my heart.”



MAKE HISTORY 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.



A YEAR OF GROWTH AT COMO

From the tiniest tree frogs to the tallest giraffes, gifts of every size helped Como grow over the last year. Here’s a look at the to-do list your support made possible in 2024:

ALL AGES ANIMAL CARE: With tiny new arrivals like Amur tiger cubs Marisa and Maks and willowy nyala newborn Walter (see page 6), Como Zoo’s keepers and veterinary staff had their hands full helping this year’s zooborns get off to a great start. Thanks to Como’s new on-site veterinary team, made possible in part by your support for Como Friends, Como Zoo also had the resources and expertise to provide specialized care to elders like Nan the polar bear, ensuring that Como Zoo’s animal ambassadors get the cutting edge care they need to thrive at every stage of life.

GREENING THE MARJORIE MCNEELY CONSERVATORY: Thanks to contributions to Como Friends, horticulturists at the Conservatory have been introducing drought and heat-tolerant perennials and pollinator-friendly plants throughout Como’s grounds. Your support also helps to provide the plant materials and professional expertise behind Como’s five seasonal flower shows, ensuring that the Sunken Garden is always Minnesota’s most beautiful room, no matter the season.

CONNECTING WITH CONSERVATION: Whether it’s telling a new story about the oak savanna ecosystem in Como Zoo’s bison habitat, or sending our intrepid education specialists to the Galapagos Islands to meet tortoises in the wild (see page 8), your support helps Como to connect with conservation efforts at home and around the world, while offering environmental education curriculum that teaches visitors about the profound connections between animals, plants and people.

PRESERVING AND MAINTAINING COMO’S HISTORIC CAMPUS: Your support helped Como move forward on needed maintenance, from pruning tropical trees, to repaving pathways for better accessibility, to updating the venting that keeps Como’s Orchid Room in bloom.

FREE ADMISSION FOR EVERY VISITOR: Como visitors came back in a big way in 2024, and your support made it possible. With more than two million visitors in 2024, Como’s free admission ensures that everyone in our community has access to the wonders of nature, every day of the year.

Thank you!

FRESH STARTS

This season, get to know a few of Como Zoo's newest arrivals

With a diet composed entirely of other animals, tigers are one of the world's most ferocious apex predators. But for new cubs Marisa and Maks, born at Como Zoo on August 29, it's going to take a little more time before they fully embrace their places at the top of the food chain.

"You might think as large carnivores that they would just come to whoever had food but that's not the case," says Como Zoo senior keeper Jill Erzar. "Cats are very observant, so when they noticed their mom was a little uneasy seeing us at the beginning, they hung back and took it all in. But now Marisa gets so excited about being fed that she lets out the cutest little scream. The two of them are just incredibly adorable."

The first tigers born at Como Zoo in more than 40 years, the tiger twins have spent the season bonding behind the scenes with their mother, Bernadette, and growing accustomed to their keepers, who've been introducing the playful pair to new enrichment items. "We started with really small things, like squash and pumpkins and cabbages and easy things that they could sink their little claws into," Erzar says. "Now they're at the point where they love cardboard boxes—they rip them apart and run from place to place dragging the shreds behind them."

The cubs represent a significant success story for the Amur Tiger Species Survival Plan (SSP), a program of the Association of Zoos and Aquariums (AZA) aimed at the conservation and management of this critically endangered species. "This is a significant milestone for Como," says Michelle Furrer, Como's campus manager. "The birth of these tiger cubs showcases the dedication of our animal care team, and the naming, by two dedicated Como volunteers, has strengthened the bond between our animals, staff, and the amazing volunteers who work tirelessly to support Como Park Zoo & Conservatory."

Large cat keeper Hans Jorgensen says the cubs notched an important milestone in December, and have now received all the vaccinations they'll need for the year ahead. "They're huge, they're unhandleable, and they're healthy, which

is just what you want to see," he says. The twins are expected to be big enough to begin exploring their outdoor habitat in early spring.

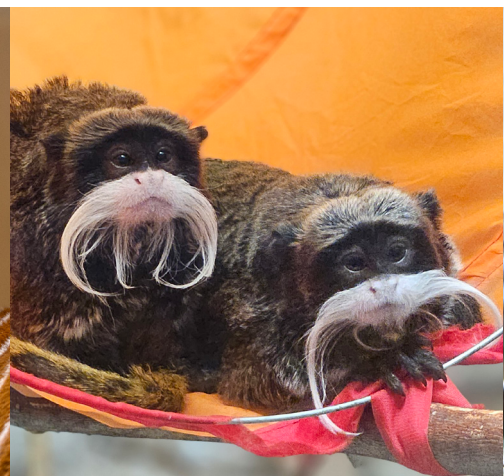
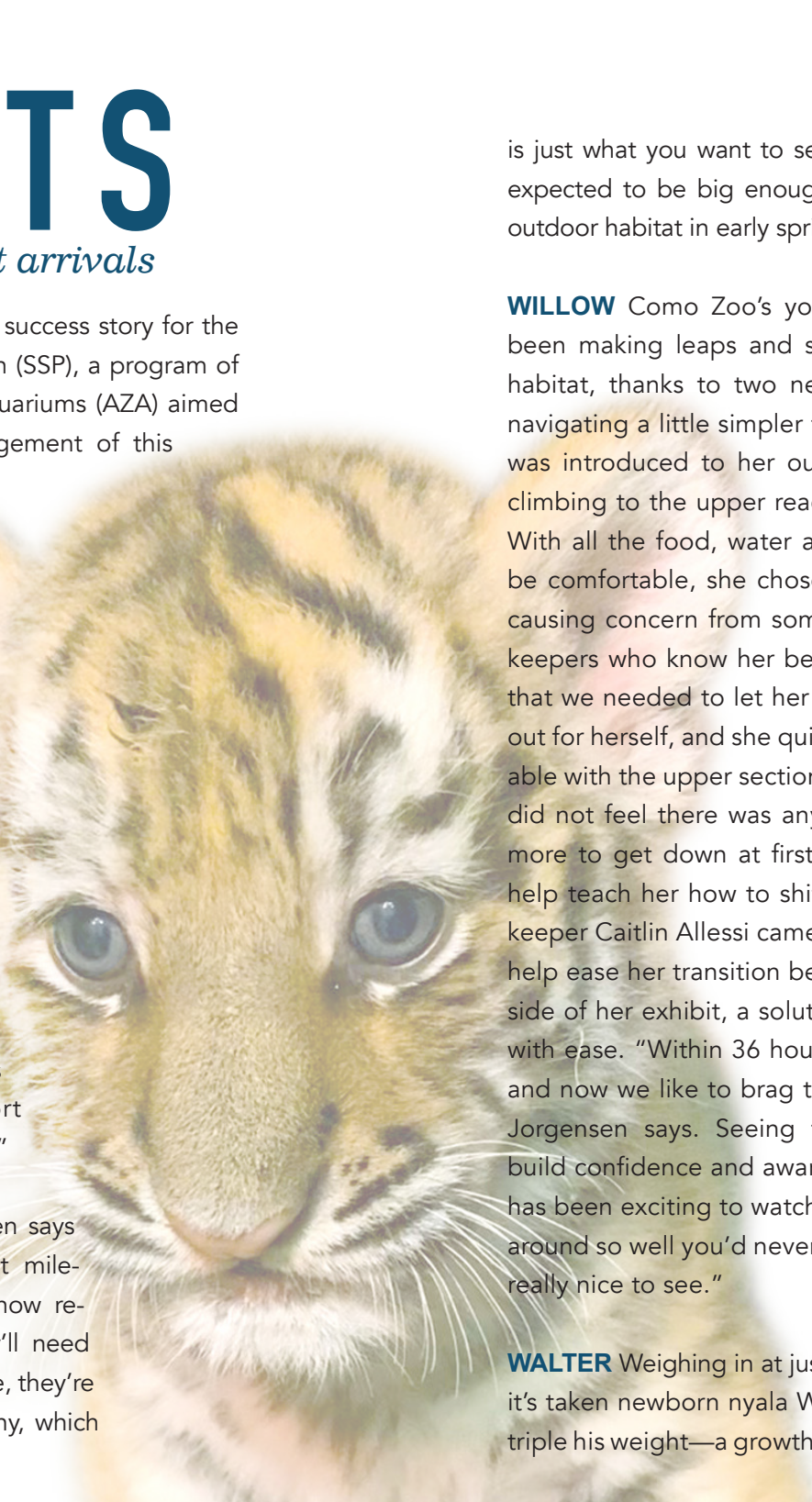
WILLOW Como Zoo's youngest snow leopard has been making leaps and strides learning about her habitat, thanks to two new ramps that now make navigating a little simpler for her. Born blind, Willow was introduced to her outdoor habitat last spring, climbing to the upper reaches of the rock structure. With all the food, water and shelter she needed to be comfortable, she chose to stay there for weeks, causing concern from some visitors, but not for the keepers who know her best. "Willow was at an age that we needed to let her start figuring some things out for herself, and she quickly became very comfortable with the upper section of the exhibit, and so she did not feel there was any need to try and explore more to get down at first," explains Jorgensen. To help teach her how to shift, he and fellow large cat keeper Caitlin Alessi came up with a ramp system to help ease her transition between the inside and outside of her exhibit, a solution that Willow embraced with ease. "Within 36 hours, she'd figured it all out, and now we like to brag that she's our best shifter," Jorgensen says. Seeing the young snow leopard build confidence and awareness of her surroundings has been exciting to watch, says Alessi. "She moves around so well you'd never know she's blind, which is really nice to see."

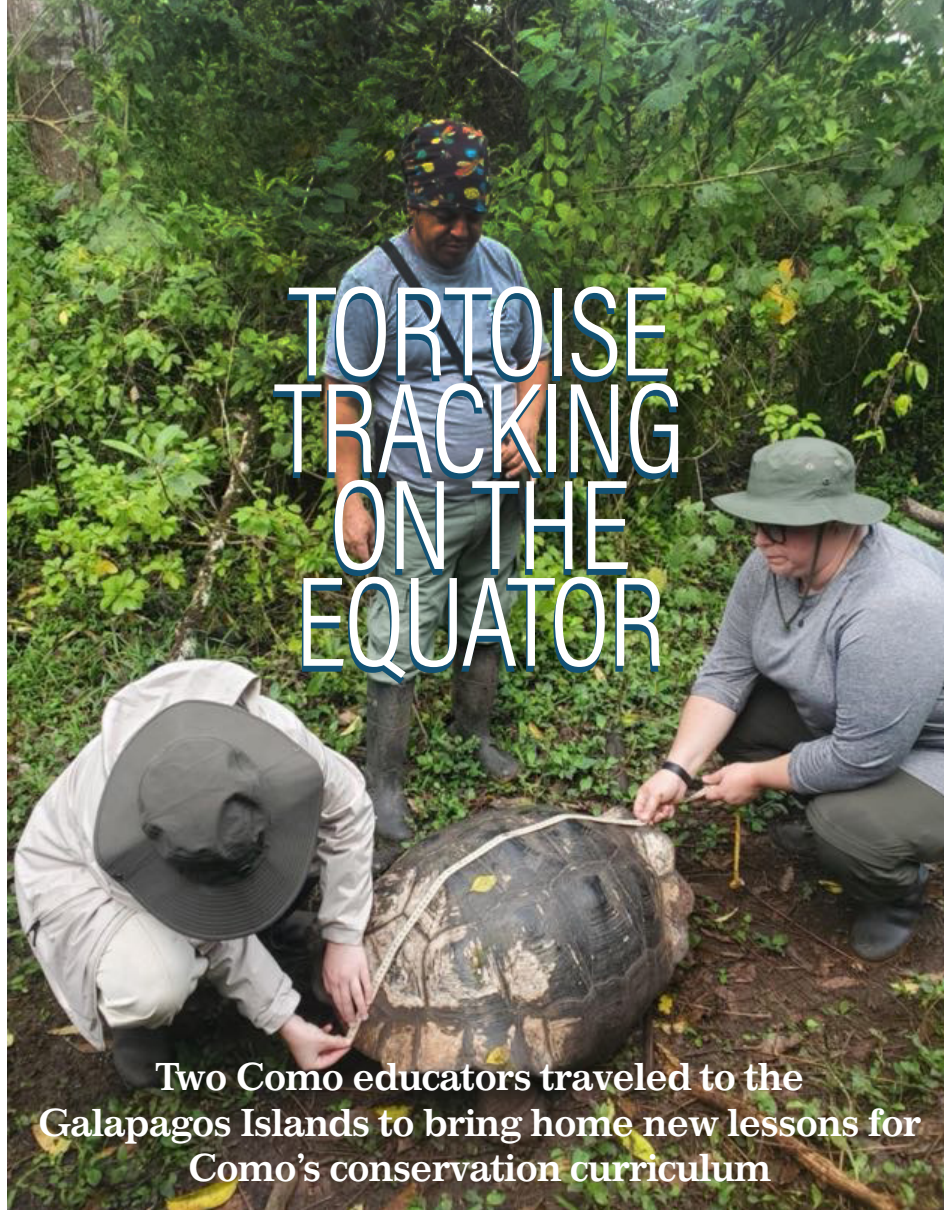
WALTER Weighing in at just 14 pounds in September, it's taken newborn nyala Walter just a few months to triple his weight—a growth trajectory seen in the wild,

too. "Female nyala like Walter's sister Meadow will typically stay with their mothers for life, but males will often leave their natal herd around six or seven months and can be reproductive fairly early on," Erzar explains. Males are also known for developing the nyala's distinctive spiral horns and darker coat. Walter, whose name was chosen by Como Friends donors on Give to the Max Day, is the second offspring for mother Stevie and father Stanley, who passed away in January of 2024.

REGGIANO AND ILSAMAR Trying to guess the gender of Como Zoo's emperor tamarins can be a bit tricky—the males, females and young of this endangered species all have very distinguished mustaches. This season Como welcomed two new individuals—Reggiano, a 3-year-old from the Buttonwood Park Zoo, and Ilsamar (Ilsa), a 2-year-old from the Dallas Zoo—as a new breeding pair put together by the AZA's Species Survival Plan. While it's too soon to say if their partnership will be a success, primate keepers have observed breeding behavior between the two.

SNOW CONE The newest resident of Como Zoo's Aquatic Animals Building is Snow Cone, an adolescent epaulette shark. Now living in the building's largest new tank, visitors can see that this nocturnal shark species exhibits some surprising behavior—appearing to "walk" across the ocean floor with its fins. A denizen of isolated tidal pools, epaulette sharks have adapted to survive severe oxygen depletion by shutting down some neural functions.





TORTOISE TRACKING ON THE EQUATOR

Two Como educators traveled to the Galapagos Islands to bring home new lessons for Como's conservation curriculum

Since 2017, Como Friends has funded the Conservation Champions program to provide opportunities for dozens of Como staff members to pursue professional passion projects, from tracking snow leopards in Kyrgyzstan, to finding cool ways to cut down on single-use plastics on Como's campus, to rehabilitating injured penguins on the coast of South Africa.

While the Conservation Champions program is open to applications from everyone at Como, it wasn't until Anne Ahiers and Ashley Verdeck got a nudge from Education & Conservation Curator Bekah Hanes, that the pair of education specialists decided it was time to make a pitch of their own. Their plan? To join a special program dedicated to educators and ecology

in the Galapagos Islands, and to take over Como's social media accounts with real-time posts about what they were learning on the way.

Their adventure started last July, when the pair joined Ecology Project International and met with their group in Quito, Ecuador. Their cohort of fellow educators came from as far away as Australia and Kazakhstan, and quickly bonded over their common love of tortoises, which they encountered on their first day, roaming through the highlands. "Just to see tortoises out in the greenery, in their natural ecosystem was amazing to us," says Verdeck. "We were all acting like little kids, we were so excited."

The group got the chance to collect biometric data on the 13 different tortoise species that occupy the Galapagos Islands, including one nearly 100-year-old animal that had never been studied before. As the group toured the volcanic archipelago, they could also see how each species has adapted to its own microhabitat.

"You'll have tortoises that look very different from one island to another island," Ahiers explains. "Tortoises that live where it's very green and rainy look a lot like Como Zoo's Irwin, who eats plants and grasses on the ground. But tortoises that live in scrubland have a different shape and size, including an aperture that's a lot wider, so they can reach their heads up and eat cacti."

Verdeck and Ahiers got a chance to visit a tortoise breeding center, where they visited the memorial for Lonesome George, the last ever Pinta Island tortoise in the world, who has become a conservation icon for the Galapagos. The team also took part in high-land restoration, helping with a conservation project working to manage invasive African snails, and studying their effect on the ecosystem.

Another day, they hiked to the famed Tortuga Bay, performing a survey on the prevalence of microplastics. "We were walking on a pristine beach, with no trash anywhere, but when you start sifting through it, you find these microplastics that are the size of a needle tip," says Verdeck. "You start to realize how hard it is to get away from this problem."

While moments like this were eye-opening for Ahiers and Verdeck, the pair say it was also inspiring, helping them to create a new Little Explorers curriculum that mimics some of the activities and lessons they learned during their trip. "You want to start kids young, and get them caring about conservation ear-

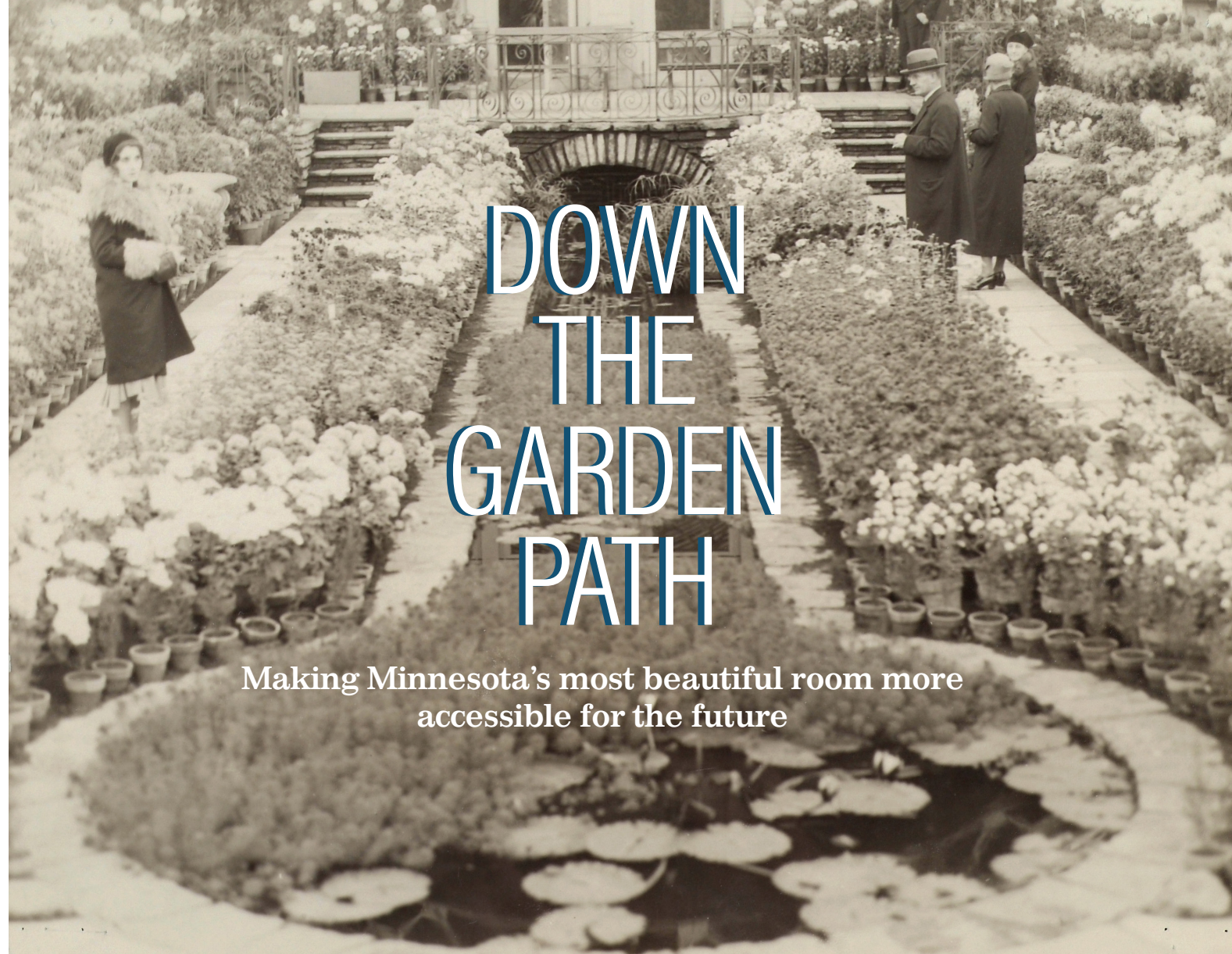
ly in life—the earlier the better," says Verdeck. "If you can teach them not to throw wrappers on the ground, and to put them in the garbage right away, that's a good place to start."

As the team posted updates about their travels, they also made strong connections with other educators in their group that have continued even since they returned to Como. "We were the only non-formal educators on the team, and sometimes it can be hard to translate why zoos are here, and what our role is," says Ahiers. "But we have an important contribution to make, because we're here to teach people about conservation, about what we can do to keep species safe and thriving, and to protect ecosystems. Conservation Champions really helped us to make those connections."



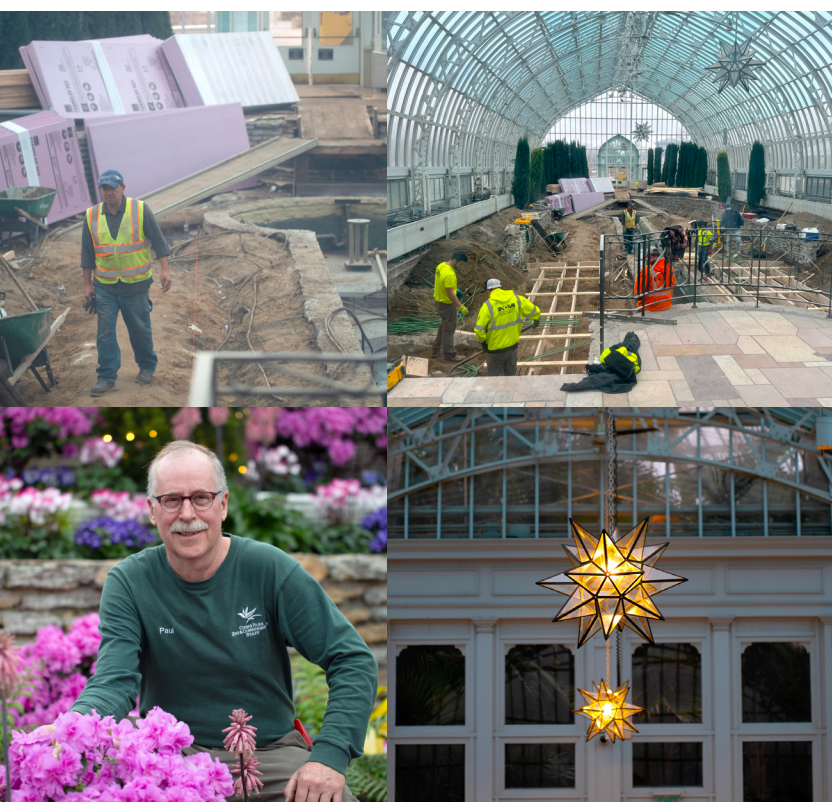
For one of the first times in its century-long history of service, the Marjorie McNeely Conservatory's Sunken Garden closed to the public earlier this winter to allow for the construction of two pedestrian ramps that will make the space more accessible to visitors. The brief closure also gave Como the chance to give the wing—a favorite Twin Cities wedding destination—a little extra sparkle. As the new and improved space reopens to the public this season, here's a look at some of the features that make the Sunken Garden so special to so many.

1 While the flowers come and go in the Sunken Garden, Minnesota's most beautiful room has very deep roots. Originally opened as the Marjorie McNeely Conservatory's south wing in 1915, the room was remodeled about a decade later to create the features we recognize today—the long, narrow floral beds, the lengthy reflecting pool, and the exceptional view from above that allows visitors to take it all in. "Sunken gardens were a trend in Europe at the time," says Paul Knuth, the retired horticulturist who created the room's rotating flower shows for more than 30 years. "But I think being able to see everything from one spot would have been the real inspiration. That view is easy on the eyes."



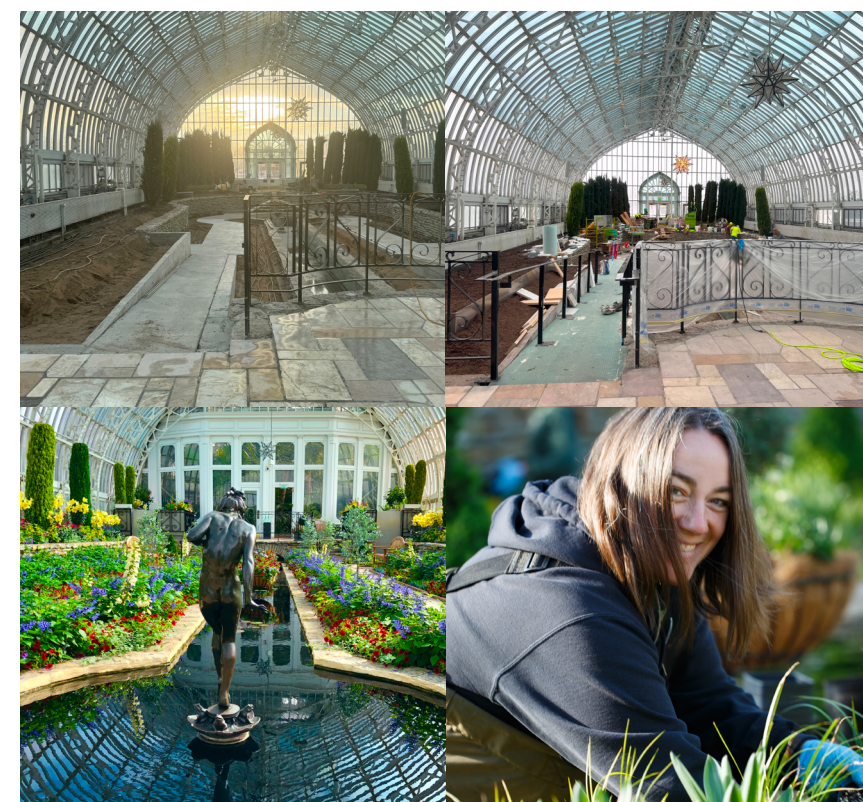
4 The Sunken Garden is a flower powerhouse, accounting for more than a third of the plants, plugs and bulbs grown each year in Como's behind-the-scenes greenhouse. That number may even grow with the removal of the obsolete elevators, which has created more room for flower beds. "That's something we're excited about, because it's a pretty significant new space for planting," says Dressler. The spring and summer flower shows alone typically require up to 10,000 bulbs each year, which means that more than a million tulips, hyacinths, daffodils and other varieties have cycled through the Sunken Garden over the last century. "For years, Como Friends has offered the bulbs for sale when we're finished with them, so it's fun to run the numbers and imagine all of the decades that Como's gardens have been making the community more beautiful, too," says Dressler.

The Sunken Garden is also the site for Como's Music Under Glass series this winter, a free concert series featuring local artists on selected Wednesday and Sunday nights. Visit comozooconservatory.org to learn more.



2 A beautiful example of the Victorian glasshouse movement, the Conservatory's listing on the National Register of Historic Places requires renovations to stay within the framework of the building's original design, including recreating the distinctive marble flooring pattern on the new ramps. With masonry work that's been kicking up a lot of dust, crews are also planning a deep cleaning of the windows and the Moravian star pendant lights. A traditional shape made popular in Germany in the 1830s, the star pendants were created by German immigrant and St. Paul craftsman Harry Fritsche. According to his grandson, Fritsche made and donated the now iconic lights to the Conservatory "as a gift to the city that welcomed him during difficult times," and they have been hanging over the Sunken Garden since 1935.

3 "Play Days," the beloved bronze sculpture at the south end of the Sunken Garden, was also removed from the Sunken Garden this winter for repair and renovation. Created by Harriet Frishmuth, an American artist who studied with Auguste Rodin at Paris's École des Beaux-Arts, the iconic sculpture is actually one of 99 known castings made of the work. In a fun twist of Como coincidence, this piece was donated to St. Paul in the 1960s by senior horticulturist Ariel Dressler's godparents. "So many people feel a family connection to that room, and so do I, when I'm dusting that statue," she says.





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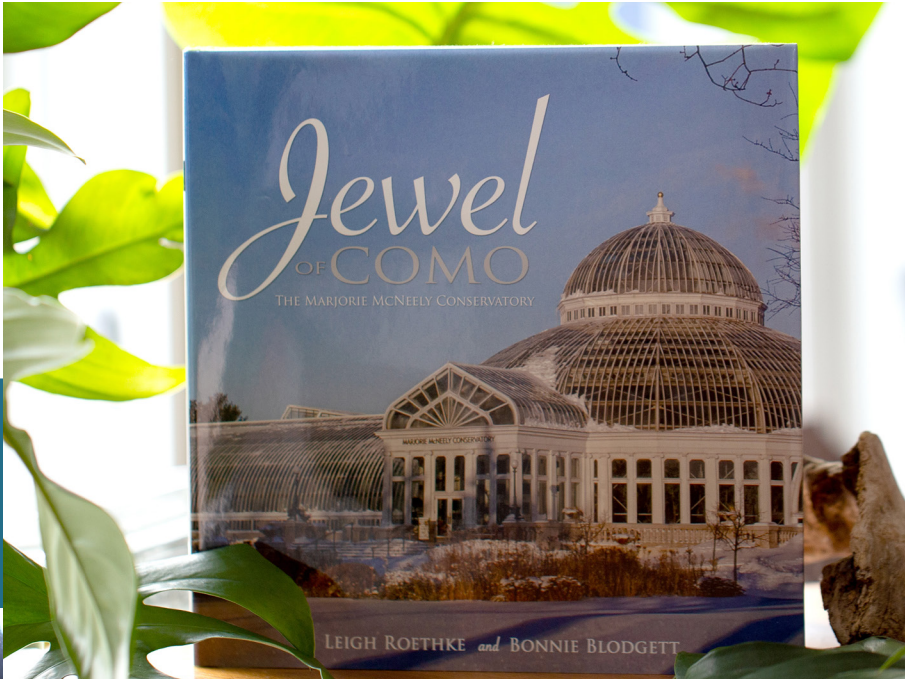
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Garden Dreaming at Garden Safari Gifts

Winter is the season for dreaming about your garden plans, and there's no better way than in these Conservatory-themed pajamas, now at Garden Safari Gifts. Learn about the history of Como's Conservatory, or sow the seeds for an inspired year of gardening with Como Friends' gift shop's exceptional collection of garden journals for the green thumbs in your life. **Remember, Como Friends members enjoy 15 percent off every purchase!**

