

Crystal's rare plants have new garden

3,000-plus varieties of flora rooted just a block from their old home

BY DARRON KLOSTER, TIMES COLONIST October 2, 2009



Plants from the Crystal Garden are unloaded and placed at Parkside Victoria Resort & Spa.

Photograph by: Bruce Stotesbury, Times Colonist

The plants of Crystal Garden have a new home.

Four years after being saved from the shredder and dug out of the former tourist attraction, more than 3,000 plants were being rooted in rich new soil yesterday inside a 10-metre-high atrium at the Parkside Resort and Spa -- a block from their former home.

"It's a historic day, a great day," said Andrew Pearson, chairman of Aviawest and developer of the Parkside, who went to great lengths and expense to salvage the greenery.

Re-patriating the plants involved four separate moves -- from the gardens to a commercial greenhouse in Cedar, then to a pair of new greenhouses built especially for them near Parksville and finally a trip back home this week aboard two 60-foot semi-trailer units.

Some of the plants were also boarded at the Horticultural Centre of the Pacific in Victoria and around other Aviawest properties on the Island.

The hoard includes 80-year-old palms, magnificent birds of paradise, rare ficus and ferns and prehistoric-looking Cy-cads.

It's considered a priceless collection, with species from dozens of tropical countries.

Pearson, who said he spent "hundreds of thousands of dollars" salvaging the collection, said replacing the

tropical plants and gaining import certifications would be next to impossible.

The atrium will be open to the public in the coming weeks, and remain open as part of the hotel lobby and commercial developments on the ground floor.

Parkside Resort, a \$100-million development at Blanshard and Humboldt streets, is a fractional ownership condominium and hotel operation.

Crystal Garden, a former saltwater swimming pool turned plant and animal conservation centre in 1980, closed under a cloud of controversy in 2005, replaced by the B.C. Experience, an interactive attraction promoting the province.

But the business closed within months of opening due to poor attendance.

The site is now part of the Victoria Conference Centre.

Pearson's original plan was to temporarily store the plants while he finished the Parkside, but the development has had a rocky road since bedrock blasting began in 2005.

The Victoria company worked with two general contractors, dealing first with a tight labour market and skyrocketing costs, then clamped credit markets and real estate sales.

Some of the palms and other plants had to be severely pruned just to get them out of Crystal Garden. All were boxed or potted to maintain tight rootballs.

Brad Forth, whose company was contracted to remove and replant the greenery, said he expects the plants to quickly grow now that they can spread their roots in metre-deep soils.

"Within a couple of years it's going to be a jungle in here," he said.

"Even the ones we put in a few weeks ago have really grown well."

Michele Keddy, who spent four years caring for the plants, said the variety is incredible.

"You don't see this kind of collection anywhere."

dkloster@tc.canwest.com

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