



**JENSEN-OLSON**  
**ARBORETUM**  
JUNEAU, ALASKA  
A CITY & BOROUGH OF JUNEAU PARKS & RECREATION FACILITY



## Spring Color with Versatile Primulas Seen in the Maritime Climate at the Jensen-Olson Arboretum

Prepared for the Northwest Flower and Garden Festival 2023

*Not Your Grandma's Primroses*

Text and photos © Ginger Hudson, Arboretum Manager and Horticulturist, [ginger.hudson@juneau.gov](mailto:ginger.hudson@juneau.gov)

*We see the sun hanging out longer each day, drawing us outside where we find surprises that survived the freeze, snow, and puddles. We are fascinated by what we hadn't seen for months—the unfamiliar shapes, the vivid colors.*



Above: *Primula denticulata* and *P. elatior* blanket the spring gardens with color. Left: *Primula auricula*, also known as bear's ears, are excellent at bed edges and in rock gardens where they have good drainage.



Top: Yellow *Primula veris* and *P. denticulata*, drumstick primrose. Center: *Primula* 'Jay-Jay' covers the ground until anemones bloom. Bottom: *Primula* 'Wanda Blue Shades' features deep red leaf margins and grows well in shade.

We've all been through some challenging natural disasters and record breaking weather stirred up by climate change in recent years. These events bring gardeners shifting USDA hardiness zones. Changes in seasonal predictability connect us in many ways.

Alaskan weather expectations like all environments, were once reliable and predictable. Snow was welcome, it benefits our gardens acting as a blanket during the cold, and lights up long dark nights. Yet today, the region is experiencing more exposed ground in winter. Precipitation is converting from snow to rain, and rain events are becoming heavier. Increased winds and extended periods of wet ground undermine plant stability—an issue along the Pacific coast from Alaska to Washington to California.

For those of us who retreat to our landscapes to relax, we're all experiencing stress about the erratic changes in weather on our gardens. Rest-assured, public garden managers also struggle to adjust.

The Jensen-Olson Arboretum, JOA, like most public gardens, exists to share knowledge, ideas, and experience. Hardy primroses are cheerful plants that have survived, and thrived southeast Alaska's seasons—weather predictable, or not. Here is a brief visit to JOA in Juneau Alaska to see what has stood the test of time and dramatic changes in weather over the past decade.

JOA resides in the land of the Aak'w kwáan Tlingit who prospered and lived with the environment for thousands of years. Navigators call this area the world-famous Inside Passage. The arboretum is just a few (hundred) miles north of Seattle, but within the same Pacific Temperate Rainforest.

Land that is now JOA was taken advantage of by a German family in the late 1880s who arrived with the flush of gold miners in Southeast Alaska. They raised children here, along with horses, and grew their own food to sustain themselves through decades of hard-rock mining. One daughter, Irma, branched out to raise mink, chickens, and even a few cows. In those days there was not much time for fanciful gardening. However, it is believed that one of the earliest blooming primroses on the grounds, *Primula juliae* 'Irma's Gold' sailed over snugly tucked into a steamer trunk belonging to the German family.



The Jensen-Olson Arboretum's setting on the Inside Passage along the coast of the Pacific Temperate Rainforest. Below: Early primroses mix texture and color with other spring flowers. *Primula Belarina*® 'Lively Lilac' and *Crocus* 'Romance'. Bottom: *Primula vulgaris* ssp. *sibthorpii*.

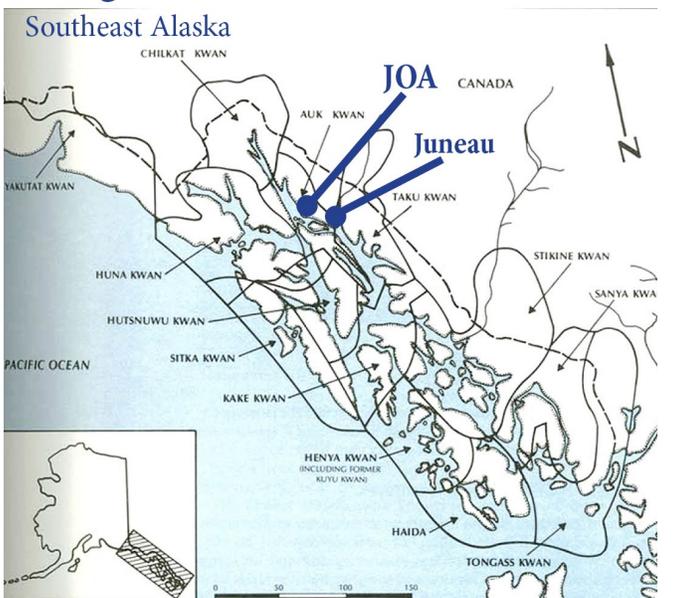


Irma's nephew Carl inherited the property and relocated here with his bride Caroline. By the 1950s, they didn't have to haul ore or tend cows in a rain-forest. Caroline spent time building colorful gardens.

Caroline was active in the Juneau Garden Club and contributed a wealth of information to their book *Gardening in Southeast Alaska*. She had a fondness for primroses and joined the American Primrose Society early on. Caroline wished her gardens to be enjoyed by everyone and worked with the Southeast Alaska Land Trust to create the first conservation easement in the region. The 14 acres Caroline tended was donated to the City and Borough of Juneau in 2007.

Seeing that the gardens were strewn with a wide variety of *Primula* species, the first arboretum director worked to build a quality collection. JOA received certification in 2012 for holding the Nationally Accredited Plant Collection™ for the Genus *Primula*. At the time of recognition, there were approximately 200 species and cultivars on site. Each spring *Primula denticulata*, *P. veris*, *P. 'City of Bellingham'*, *P. 'City of Juneau'*,

## Tlingit Ancestral Lands



Map by Andrew Hope III





*P. 'Lady Greer'* provide a calliope of candy colors blanketing garden beds. As varieties rotate through bloom cycles, taller species appear mid- to late summer, *P. japonica*, *P. chungensis*, and *P. alpicola*, with one blooming until near frost: *P. florindae*.

JOA selects plants based on USDA plant hardiness zone ranges 3-7. Many plants have been tested over the past fifteen years, adding and losing varieties along the way. A loss is always an opportunity to try a new species. This is where the American Primrose Society comes in handy. As members, JOA donates seed to the society's seed exchange. Members of APS get first

notice of seeds to purchase.

Many decorative primula survive dormancy through our maritime winter even if snow melts, and returns.

A marvelous example of stamina rests on a bed of moss. It is a diminutive, buttery-yellow primula affectionately called 'Irma's Gold'. 'Irma's Gold' is not only an early primrose, it's one of the earliest blooming perennials along with snowdrops and corydalis.

Native insects have adapted to varieties of non-native perennials including the primroses. Native sryphid flies, bumble bees, hawk moths, and even hummingbirds have been observed at *Primula* nectaries.



Top: *Primula* 'Irma's Gold' (unofficial) a juliea variety, is one of the first flowers to bloom after snow melt. Center: when our grounds look like this, we react to any color that pops up, to any new feature in the landscape. Primulas show off before other perennials appear. Right: The whimsical drumstick primrose, *Primula denticulata*, starts blooming in March and can last until June. Drumstick primroses can be found in purple, magenta, and white. They are attractive to hummingbirds and grow in a variety of conditions.



If these plants benefit the endemic wildlife, can we use them to educate about pollination and other wildlife uses? So far, we have found that most of these primroses are helpful and beautiful without running rampant. One late bloomer, *Primula florindae*, should be closely watched due to its penchant for drainage areas.

Each year the arboretum tests new varieties of plants; adding or replacing primroses, requesting specimens from gardens in similar climates, and exploring our backyard looking to highlight regional plants. There are native *Primula* in Alaska and JOA strives to cultivate examples. This is a challenge that takes patience as the state's native species thrives at higher altitudes than the arboretum's sea-level vantage.

Home gardeners do not have to do the research on their own. We use resources that just about anyone can access: our local garden clubs, local master gardeners, the forest service, native plant societies, national groups like the North American Rock Garden Society and the American Primrose Society, and our neighbors. Gardeners living near public gardens can take advantage of their success by purchasing from botanical garden and arboreta plant sales. Great PNW resources include the University of Washington Botanical Garden <https://botanicgardens.uw.edu>; Bellevue Botanical Garden <https://bellevuebotanical.org>; and Washington state Cooperative extension, <https://extension.wsu.edu>.

Top: Sometimes close inspection is required for exquisite details like in this *Primula veris* ssp. *veris*.  
Center: Perky and colorful, spring primroses delight gardeners while we wait for summer perennials.  
Right: Candelabra primroses are the warmer summer varieties. These *Primula japonica* can be seen on the grounds of the University of Washington Arboretum in May. *P. japonica* prefers moist areas of the garden.



# Spring Primroses blooming first alongside Crocus, Hyacinth, Corydalis, and Trillium (generally listed in order of appearance)

*Primula denticulata*  
*P. juliae*  
*P x pruhoniana* 'Dorothy'  
*P. elatior*, *P. elatior* ssp. *pallasii*  
*P. elatior* ssp. *meyeri*  
*P. veris*  
*P. marginata*  
*P. 'Jay Jay'*  
*P. 'Wanda'* varieties

*P. 'City of Juneau'*  
*P. 'City of Bellingham'*  
*P. Belarina*® series, bloom spring and fall  
*P. 'Lady Greer'*  
*P. vulgaris*  
*P. auricula*  
*P. hoffmanniana*  
*P. japonica*



Right: *Primula marginata* 'Amethyst' in the auricula group, likes good drainage.  
 Below: The rich orange of the candelabra variety *Primula chungensis* signals mid-summer;

~ ~ ~  
 Thank you to Janet Endsley and the organizers of the NWFGF for your perseverance.  
 And, of course, to you, lifelong students of gardening, thank you for your interest.  
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 [facebook.com/CBJJOA/](https://facebook.com/CBJJOA/)

[americanprimrosesociety.org](http://americanprimrosesociety.org)



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[friendsjoarboretum.org](http://friendsjoarboretum.org)



# OPEN YEAR ROUND

WEDNESDAY  
through  
SUNDAY

9:00AM - 5:00PM

Gate Closes/Last Entry 4:45PM



Visit often; every season is uniquely beautiful!



The Arboretum is located 23 miles north of downtown Juneau on Glacier Highway. From downtown, head north on Egan Drive passing the airport, Auke Bay, and the ferry terminal. Continue "out the road" watching for the small green mile markers. Look for us on the left, just past Mile 23.

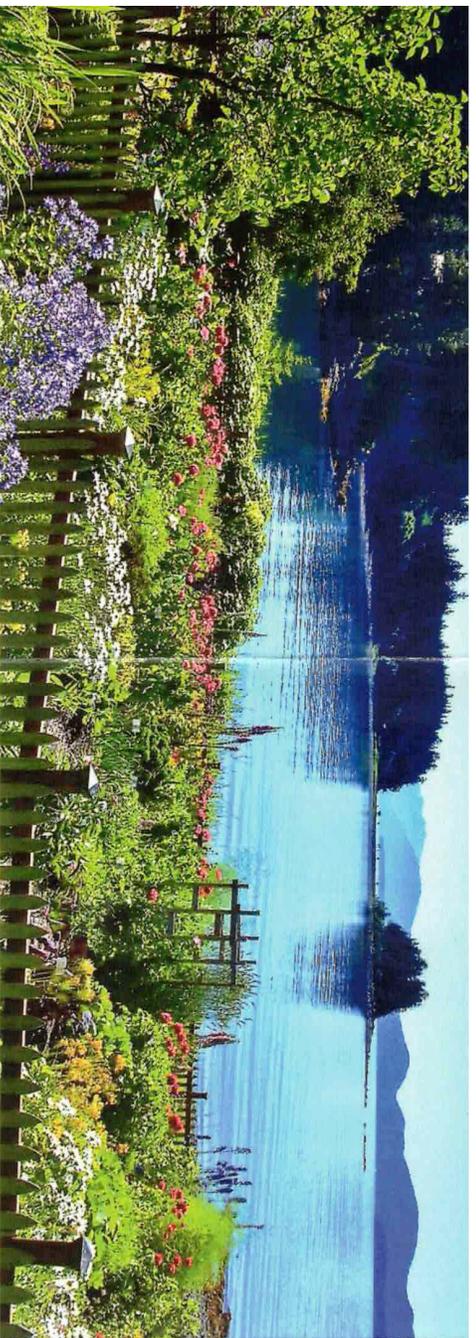


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*“The vision of the Arboretum is to provide the people of Juneau a place that both teaches and inspires learning in horticulture, natural sciences and landscaping – to preserve the beauty of the landscape for pure aesthetic enjoyment – to maintain the historical and cultural context of the place and its people.”*

Caroline Jensen

**NOTES:**

Dogs are not allowed per CBU regulation 11 CBUAC 03.030. Please walk on grass and pathways only.  
 The Arboretum is available for weddings on a limited basis. Contact the Arboretum office for details.  
 Professional photography is subject to certain guidelines; please inquire with the Arboretum office.

ALL PHOTOS COURTESY OF MERRILL JENSEN

**HISTORY**



The land was developed by the Peterson family when they homesteaded the property in 1904. The vegetable garden provided produce to Juneau grocers in the early 1900s and is now used for educational purposes with produce donated to local food banks and after-school programs.

**VISION**



The long-range vision for the Arboretum includes the establishment of the Southeast Alaska Botanical Education Center (SEABEC). This will consist of a multi-purpose classroom and library to serve as a living laboratory for botanical and cultural education.

Donations to the Arboretum are tax deductible and may be made through Friends of Jensen-Olson Arboretum, a 501(c)3 organization.

*Your contributions bring plants to life!*

**PRIMROSE**



The Arboretum houses the Nationally Accredited Plant Collection™ for the genus *Primula*. One of Caroline’s passions, *Primula* are also known by their common name of primrose. The garden bursts with varied colors in early spring through late summer. Some of the species seen here are rarely grown anywhere else in North America.

