



DOCUMENT 1 OF 3 • THE CASE

Why Boulder Needs a Botanical Garden

Boulder already thinks it has everything. Here's what it's missing: a public garden that brings more art, more research and more revenue to the city, and the biggest step forward Boulder has taken in decades.

IN BRIEF

A new civic institution, arriving at the right moment

A botanical garden is not a park upgrade. It is a permanent public destination that serves every age, gives Boulder's artists and scientists a home, and earns its keep through visitors who come all year.

Three things make now the time:

- **Sundance arrives January 21, 2027.** The world will judge Boulder on what it finds beyond four blocks of Pearl Street.
- **Boulder's visitor economy is seasonal.** A garden with a conservatory, a winter light festival and a summer concert lawn gives people a reason to come in every month.
- **Other cities have already proven the model.** Gardens in Madison, Columbus, Salt Lake City and Boothbay, Maine, return tens of millions of dollars a year to their regions.

THE MOMENT

Sundance puts Boulder on the world stage

The festival runs January 21–31, 2027, with official venues across downtown and CU Boulder, including Boulder High School and the Canyon Theater at the Main Library. In Utah, the festival was a major economic engine:

\$118.3M

Added to Utah's GDP by the 2023 festival

1,608

Jobs for Utah residents from the 2023 festival

\$106.4M

Spent by out-of-state visitors at the 2024 festival

Sundance brings the world for eleven days in January. A garden is how Boulder brings them back in May, July and October. A visitor who walks the grounds in winter light returns for the summer bloom.

WHAT IT SOLVES

Five problems a garden solves at once

ARTS & MUSIC

More stages for Boulder's creative life

The plan includes a Live Music Lawn and stage framed by the Flatirons, a sculpture garden, the Super Bloom event hall and seasonal festivals, from a spring Parade of Puppets to a summer Lavender & Poppy Festival.

Gardens that pair plants with art and music draw huge crowds. Denver Botanic Gardens became North America's most-visited public garden in 2014, with more than 1.4 million visitors, when it paired its plants with a Dale Chihuly glass exhibition. Red Butte Garden in Salt Lake City runs a 30-show summer concert series for up to 3,000 guests a night, and the proceeds support the garden.

RESEARCH & LEARNING

A living laboratory for the public

Boulder is home to world-class environmental science, but most of it happens behind closed doors. A garden puts it on display: alpine and native Front Range collections, pollinator studies, water-wise landscapes and creek restoration, plus a greenhouse dome with a working propagation lab.

Gardens do real science. Santa Barbara Botanic Garden runs an herbarium, a seed bank and a genetics lab for rare native plants. Denver Botanic Gardens won a federal Museums for America grant for alpine plant conservation. Boulder's garden would partner with CU Boulder, Naropa and local schools, and give every child in the county a reason to visit.

It would complement CU's own collections rather than copy them. CU's EBIO Research Greenhouse holds more than 6,000 living plants of 1,500 species but opens to the public only twice a year, and the CU Herbarium keeps about 320,000 preserved specimens for researchers. The garden would be the public home for that science (see "Built to complement CU," below).

REVENUE

Visitor spending, all year long

Downtown surveys show out-of-state visitors spend nearly double per visit what local residents spend. A garden adds a full-day reason to stay another night. The business plan projects 200,000–300,000 visits a year once built, and an operating budget of about \$8.5 million carried largely by admissions, memberships, events and festivals.

Comparable gardens show what that returns to a city (table below).

SEASONALITY

A reason to visit in every month

Boulder's tourism leans on summer and big events. Visit Boulder notes that after May graduation, a third of the city's population leaves. A conservatory that stays green all winter, a Winter Festival of Lights and a spring pollinator festival give the city a steady draw when the students and summer crowds are gone.

CROWDING

More than Pearl Street

Pearl Street is four blocks, from 11th to 15th, and Sundance plans to center the festival around it. A garden a short walk away gives visitors a second place to spend a day, spreading foot traffic and spending instead of concentrating them.

What gardens return to their communities

GARDEN	ANNUAL VISITORS	ANNUAL REVENUE OR BUDGET	WHAT IT RETURNS TO ITS COMMUNITY
Denver Botanic Gardens	1,434,573 (2023)	\$41.6M revenue (2024)	North America's most-visited garden in 2014; a nonprofit on city land
Olbrich Botanical Gardens, Madison	372,314 (2025 study)	\$3.67M Society revenue (2024)	\$20.1M in local economic activity, 146 jobs and \$1.3M in state and local taxes
Coastal Maine Botanical Gardens	336,400 (2021)	Not reported here	\$41.9M regional economic impact and 310 local jobs
Red Butte Garden, Salt Lake City	250,000+	\$10.5M budget (2021)	Concerts supplied 51% of its revenue (FY2019–20)
Zilker Botanical Garden, Austin	125,000+	\$990K conservancy revenue (2024)	Anchors Zilker Park; thousands of schoolchildren a year
Santa Barbara Botanic Garden	Up to 110,000 (county cap)	\$13.1M revenue (2024)	Budget grew from \$2.3M (2010) to \$9.5M; record membership
Betty Ford Alpine Gardens, Vail	100,000+	\$1.81M revenue (FY2025)	Free admission year-round; a draw for Vail Village
Gardens on Spring Creek, Fort Collins	About 70,000	\$454K Friends revenue (2024)	Built after a 1997 vote; the City funds operations
Franklin Park Conservatory, Columbus	Not reported here	Not reported here	\$35.6M average annual output; \$3.50 returned for every public dollar

City-run gardens (Spring Creek, Zilker) show only their nonprofit partner's revenue; the city budget is separate. Coastal Maine is the closest story to Boulder's: it began in 2007 as a conversation among friends and grew into the largest public garden in New England.

CU keeps the record. The garden keeps it alive.

Boulder already has world-class plant collections at CU Boulder, but they are built for scientists, not the public. The garden fills the gap between them instead of duplicating either.

	EBIO RESEARCH GREENHOUSE	HERBARIUM COLO	BOULDER BOTANICAL GARDENS
Holds	6,000+ living plants, 1,500 species	About 320,000 pressed specimens	Living gardens outdoors, conservatory and dome
Built for	Teaching and research	The scientific record	The public
Public access	Two tours a year	By arrangement	Every day

Six ways CU and the garden make each other stronger

- **A public front door:** a rotating “From the Herbarium” exhibit pairs century-old specimens with the same plants growing outside.
- **A documented collection:** the garden files reference specimens of its Colorado plants in COLO.
- **Outdoor research plots** at the canyon mouth for EBIO and INSTAAR climate and pollinator studies.
- **Climate change you can see:** volunteers record bloom dates today against the herbarium’s historical record.
- **A shared dome:** a joint display and propagation lab with EBIO, not a duplicate research greenhouse.
- **Outreach at scale:** every school in the county, with CU students as guides.

What the garden will not build: a research herbarium, a research-grade greenhouse or competing degree programs.

WHO IT SERVES

Every age, every day

Seniors get level, safe, beautiful walking loops and shaded benches, steps from the Creek Path.

Children get nature play, creek discovery and school field trips.

Students and researchers get a living lab and a place to share their work.

Families and visitors get a full day out that doesn’t require a trailhead, a car or a shopping bag.



Concept rendering: summer concerts on the Live Music Lawn.

THE BIGGER PICTURE

Not an incremental step, a paradigm shift

Boulder has extraordinary open space, a great university and a famous four-block mall. What it lacks is a single civic place that says, in one view, what the city believes: that nature, science and the arts belong at the center of public life.

For residents, a daily place of beauty. For businesses, a year-round reason to visit. For the world, a message that Boulder leads on how a city lives with its land and its water.

And it can only be this garden in this place. On the edge of town, a botanical garden would be pleasant. At 6th and Canyon it is woven into Boulder Creek, the Creek Path, the library, the Farmers Market and downtown, and it renews a corner of the city whose current use keeps the public out. There is no better place for it, and no better use for this land.

This is the garden Boulder should have planted decades ago, and Sundance makes now the moment to do it.

Read next: Document 2, Why This Location, and Document 3, The Business Plan. ·
BoulderBotanicalGardens.org · Contact & press: LetsGrowTheBoulderBG@gmail.com

SOURCES

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