

Summer 2026

Inside the Domes

Mitchell Park Horticultural Conservatory



Penelope welcomed
3,426
visitors
during its
weekend
bloom!



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THE CEO**

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Cover Image: Close-up photo of Penelope, one of the Domes' rare corpse flowers.

News From the Domes

A Message from the CEO

By: Christa Beall Diefenbach, CEO, Milwaukee Domes Alliance



Our CEO, Christa Beall Diefenbach, welcomed Governor Tony Evers, Travel Wisconsin Secretary Anne Sayers, Deputy Secretary Maria Van Hoorn, and Representative Priscilla Prado to the Mitchell Park Domes

Dear Domes members and friends,

I hope you are enjoying the warmth and sunshine of these summer days. I am pleased to share an update on the exciting momentum behind the Domes Reimagined plan as we gear up to begin construction on the first phase of the project in 2027.

As our loyal and amazing members, you have helped make this progress possible. We've had some incredible wins this year—building on a year of broad validation. This momentum is the clearest signal yet that the Domes Reimagined plan is on track to launch soon.

Thank you for what you have done—and will do—to help us reimagine the beloved Mitchell Park Domes.

National Register of Historic Places

On May 15, 2026, the Wisconsin State Review Board approved the nomination of the Mitchell Park Domes to the State Register of Historic Places. The application is now with the National Park Service. Designed by Milwaukee architect Donald Grieb and constructed in phases from 1959 to 1967, the Domes are the only conoidal glass-domed conservatory in the world. Federal listing would formally affirm the Domes'

significance and unlock access to additional funding.

\$2 Million Grant from State Building Commission

On May 13, 2026, the Wisconsin State Building Commission approved a \$2 million grant for the Domes Reimagined project. Once restoration is complete, the Domes are projected to draw nearly 500,000 visitors annually from throughout the state and beyond, generating millions in tourism spending and sales tax revenue.

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Fundraising Progress

The Milwaukee Domes Alliance is pleased to report that the philanthropic campaign in support of the Domes Reimagined project is on schedule. We have secured 54% of the \$17.1 million required to break ground in 2027.

Thank you to our members

who have stepped forward with leadership gifts. We will launch a public campaign in early 2027.

VIP Visitors

We were thrilled to welcome Governor Tony Evers, Secretary of Tourism Anne Sayers, and Mayor Cavalier Johnson in May. It is exciting to see the statewide enthusiasm for the Domes Reimagined project.

If you are interested in learning more about the Domes Reimagined plan, scan the QR code below or visit www.DomesReimagined.org. ▼



The Secret Behind the Stained Glass

Featuring Melania Lancy, Domes Exhibit Designer

When we sat down with exhibit designer Melania Lancy to talk about Glass Under Glass, we expected to hear about color, plants, and stained glass. We did not expect the story to begin with Facebook Marketplace and a man with thirty stained-glass windows.

Thirty. Melania had to ask why.

“I have a bit of a stained-glass problem,” the collector told Melania during their first conversation..

For years, the collector had been rescuing windows at auctions to protect an art form he loved. Every wall in his home was full; the rest waited behind furniture. When Melania told him about the summer show, he offered his one-of-a-kind pieces to the Domes, asking nothing in return. A private collection became part of the city’s living museum.



That spirit runs through the whole exhibit. Look closely and you will find glass lampshades reborn as flowers, a gift shop trellis transformed into faux stained glass, and a garden bed planted in a stained-glass pattern, its dark border standing in for leading.

As Melania puts it, the magic is in “interacting the art and the plants together to make

something new.” One collector said yes—and the whole Dome lit up. ▼



Photos of Glass Under Glass, taken from inside Show Dome

Penelope the Corpse Flower Drew a Crowd

For two unforgettable days in June, all eyes and noses were on Penelope, our corpse flower, as she reached her rare and short-lived bloom. A corpse flower can spend 5 to 10 years storing energy before it blooms at all, and even then the timing is famously unpredictable. Penelope first bloomed in June 2024, so her return just two years later surprised even our horticulturists. Visitors poured in from across Milwaukee, the suburbs, and Chicagoland to catch her.

Reactions ran the full range. Some leaned in for a closer look, others backed away laughing, and more than a few couldn't resist a dramatic response to Penelope's famously pungent perfume—a scent she generates on purpose, heating herself to spread it and draw pollinators. Everyone left with a story, and many left with a commemorative sticker.

Here's what many members may not know: coaxing a corpse flower to bloom even once is a feat—and the Domes have done it again and again. Since Pepé le Pew first opened in 2018, our horticulture team has brought a whole cast to bloom—Pig Pen, Stinkerbelle, Musky, U'Reeka, and Penelope among them—placing the Domes in one of only a few conservatories anywhere that manage it repeatedly. Penelope is a homegrown star in a remarkable collection.



Penelope in the Tropical Dome

Penelope has since gone quiet, storing up energy for a bloom that could be years away. And when she's ready, our members will be the first to know.

Penelope bloomed June 27–28, 2026, staying open for roughly 48 hours. Her central spadix heats to 90–98°F to broadcast its signature scent—and a corpse flower's underground corm has to weigh at least 20 pounds before it can bloom at all. ▼

Beneficial Bugs: Part of the Domes' Micro-Ecosystem

By: Justine Miller, Horticulturist, Arid Collection



Larva of Cryptolaemus montrouzieri, also known as the mealybug destroyer

Here at the Domes, we have several sustainable systems and practices, most of which are behind the scenes. However, if you're lucky you might see one of the most exciting practices taking place inside the Domes themselves: the release of thousands of tiny creatures into the plants. These are beneficial insects, part of a larger group of chemical-free pest control options referred to as biological controls.

Biological controls utilize natural processes, such as predation or infection by a pathogen, to target pests. Each of the species we release feeds on or parasitizes a pest species. In some cases, such as aphid parasitoids, they target a specific group of insects—aphids—and in other cases, such as lacewings, the predators are generalists.

Beneficial insects make up one important piece of the concept known as Integrated

Pest Management, or IPM. The goal of IPM is to manage pests using all the tools we have: cultural, mechanical, biological, and finally, chemical, while relying on the chemical component only when absolutely necessary. In the conservatory, it looks something like this: first, we try to control the environment of each dome to be as well-suited to the collection as possible. For example, in the winter, we keep the Desert Dome cool and as dry as we can; in the Tropical Dome, we keep it warmer and add humidity through a misting system. Appropriate conditions for the plants are the first step to combating pests and disease. Next, we utilize mechanical methods of pest removal, such as strong water sprays on infested plants, or removing particularly infested portions of a plant. The next step we take is biological controls,

releasing our beneficial insects to kill pests. Finally, if chemical intervention is needed, we typically use an oil or botanical contact insecticide instead of harsher chemicals.

Because the Domes are man-made environments designed to mimic the natural world, they meet the needs of insects: sunlight, cover, moisture, spaces to lay eggs, and a food source. Some species of predatory insects can survive on alternative sources of food during times of low pest populations. As a result, they are able to survive and reproduce among the plants, creating populations of predators that continue to keep their prey species in check. We continue to release insects regularly to ensure populations are strong enough to overwhelm the target pests.

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Upcoming Events at the Domes

Storytime in the Lobby

Every Wed., 10AM
(No registration required.)

Wacky Wednesdays

First Wed. each month

Bilingual Storytime

Last Wed. each month

SPARK!

Aug. 18, 10-11:30AM

Aug. 19, 1:30-3PM

Sept. 15, 10-11:30AM

Sept. 16, 1:30-3PM

Oct. 20, 10-11:30AM

Oct. 21, 1:30-3PM

(Free for those with memory loss and their caregivers; pre-registration required.)

Growing & Thriving Workshops

Aug. 25, 10 AM-12PM

Sept. 24, 1:30-4PM

(Sept. 24 workshop is bilingual Spanish/English.)

Wisconsin Orchid Show & Sale

Sept. 12-13, 9 AM-4PM

Fall Floral Show

Opens Sept. 19

Día de los Muertos

Oct. 30, 6-9PM ▼

Scan for
all events



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As you walk through the Domes, you may notice some small cards or blister packs hanging in the foliage, or you may see a sprinkle of bran or vermiculite on leaves. These are key methods of beneficial insect application. Some are put onto paper cards as eggs. Others are larvae or adult bugs placed into a container with inert material, which is then sprinkled on the plants. Many of the insects are so small that they



Parasitized aphid mummy

are difficult to see, but if you look very closely, you might be able to spot some of them. Very tiny parasitic wasps (smaller than a fruit fly) crawl among aphid colonies, laying eggs inside live aphids. As the larvae grow, they eventually kill their aphid host, which then turns brown and papery. The adult wasp creates a hole and exits, leaving the aphid “mummy” behind.

You may notice a lacewing feeding on pollen while you

stroll through the Domes. It is the adult version of the “aphid lions” we release among the plants. Each individual larva can consume hundreds of aphids before turning into an adult, but it also eats many other pests, including thrips, mites, and mealybugs.

The last beneficial insect you may come across is a type of ladybug called the Mealybug Destroyer. Adults are 3-4mm long. They have a black midsection and are brown on both ends. Larvae eventually grow to around half an inch and can easily be mistaken for mealybugs: they are white with waxy filaments all over their backs. Adult females lay their eggs among mealybug egg masses. Once hatched, larvae can consume over 250 mealybugs, or over 1,000 mealybug eggs.

Recently, with generous funds from Milwaukee Domes Alliance, we have been able to greatly increase our beneficial insect applications. This started with our production greenhouses, which were able to grow the entire Día de los Muertos marigold crop using biological controls alone, avoiding the use of chemical pesticides. This year, the conservatory has been implementing our new biological control program, with noticeable results. Next time you walk through the Domes, remember our tiny cohorts doing their important work! ▼

From the Education Center

Behind the Scenes of a Field Trip

By: Erica Veto, Education Director, and Pete Stobie, Lead Interpretive Educator

Erica: In 2020 we rebuilt our field trip curriculum with teachers in mind. Our programs are designed to meet multiple Wisconsin State Standards and Next Generation Science Standards, and we shaped them by talking directly with local teachers about their goals and the real challenges of learning outside the classroom. But here's our secret: just by showing up, students are already in for something unforgettable. The Domes, simply by being what they are, hand our future earth ambassadors an awe-inspiring moment the second they walk through our doors. From there, our team helps them discover even more.



Pete: Every field trip is built around an interpretive theme, like “Plants are Important”. I’ve had a hand in developing each of our programs, so I know the material cold, and my favorite part is tailoring that message to each grade level

and each group that comes through. I lean on humor to do it: corny dad jokes (why does a hummingbird hum? Because it doesn’t know the words), or Slim Prickly, my Saguaro cactus puppet. Pulling a puppet out of a cactus laundry bin breathes life into the moment and holds a young audience for the short time we have them. Interpretive educators call it a “bag of tricks.” I’ve been filling mine for 30 years—with knowledge, humor, group management, and every other tool of the craft—and whatever moment I’m in, I know just what to reach for to reconnect students to that core message and to our incredible plant collection. ▼



Lead Interpretive Educator Pete Stobie inviting children to dig into their love of nature



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Get Involved

The Mitchell Park Domes are more than a landmark—they are a one-of-a-kind home to one of the nation's largest and most unique horticultural collections.

The Domes inspire curiosity, offer a place of respite, and connect our community to the beauty and wonder of nature.

Your gift to the Milwaukee Domes Alliance helps preserve this world-class horticultural conservatory for future generations. Your support helps care for our living plant collection, creates memorable guest experiences, and ensures the Domes continue to thrive as a cherished community treasure for years to come.

Please consider making a gift today. ▼



Donate NOW

Give MONTHLY

