

Kew's alpine adventure

New greenhouse is clear attraction

BY ELLEN WIDDUP

THIS slender, graceful structure is the latest addition to Kew Gardens' greenhouses.

The futuristic design, so delicate that at some angles it almost disappears from sight, has been built using 211 panes of polished glass wedged between stick-thin steel rods.

The see-through shell, which will house some of Kew's alpine plants, will be officially unveiled to the public this weekend.

Jim Eyre, director of Wilkinson Eyre Architects, said all visual considerations had to be secondary when the conservatory was being planned.

"The key drive was to create a form conducive to the requirements of the plants," he said.

"We wanted to make something highly transparent to the point of invisibility and the result was something elegant, beautiful and aesthetically pleasing."

The Davies Alpine House is first public glasshouse to be built at Kew for 20 years. Senior architect Geoff Turner said the building had design

STILL GROWING

- The Davies Alpine House floorspace is 3,200 sq ft.
- Of its 211 glass panels, 34 open to let hot air escape.
- Kew has 40,000 varieties of plant and 22 miles of paths.
- The World Heritage site has seven greenhouses. The original one was built in 1887, enlarged four years later and replaced in 1981.
- Kew's oldest surviving tree is a sweet chestnut, planted in the early 1700s.
- King George III recuperated from his "madness" in 17th-century Kew Palace.
- The tea pavilion, burned down by suffragettes in 1913, was rebuilt in 1920.



Functional and beautiful: the architects of the new Davies Alpine House in Kew Gardens describe it as "elegant and aesthetically pleasing"

similarities to Wilkinson Eyre's "winking" bridge in Gateshead.

"Kew Gardens has a fantastic tradition of glass buildings which the beauty to technology," he said. "This design is

about something environmentally sustainable which serves a purpose.

"It is also extremely pleasing on the eye." The greenhouse boasts a large rock garden and beds to

include everything from broad planting bays and gullies to narrow cracks and crevices.

It will house a variety of small ferns, lavender, primulas, thymes and tulips. The building's geometry encour-

ages the complex environmental conditions necessary for alpinists to grow.

The twin arch, rising to 10 metres, has been designed to allow warm air out through openings at the top and draw

cooler air in through vents in the base. Peacock-fan shades and the curved sides help deflect direct sunlight, protecting the plants.

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