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# Opryland's Top Gardener

Horticulturist Hollis Malone nurtures thousands of plants, and even hotel guests, at the classic Nashville resort. BY NANCY DORMAN-HICKSON

**H**is first day on the job, Hollis Malone literally came up against a glass ceiling.

Now, as manager of horticulture and pest control for one of the country's largest and busiest resorts, he's often contacted by people around the world for his advice. But few people in the plant business, or at the Gaylord Opryland Resort Hotel & Convention Center, knew Hollis when he was hired in 1982—just as work began on a grandiose atrium.

"The engineers didn't like me at all," he remembers. "The roof they designed was shaded, and they'd already ordered tinted glass." However, Hollis's mission to create a jaw-dropping, world-class indoor garden required pure, unadulterated sunlight—and lots of it.

"When I talked to the architect, I said, 'When you shut out the light, it's like gardening in the shade versus gardening in the sun.'" The young horticulturist felt confident that the hotel could provide warming sunlight for plants and comfortable temperatures for guests if it planted trees to shade the lower parts of the atrium and absorb most of the heat just as they do in outdoor parks. *➔ turn to page 4*



**ABOVE:** Horticulturists Hollis Malone (center), Rae Veach, and Robert Alexander pinch back spent angelonia flowers. Hollis and his staff of about 50 care for plants inside and outside the resort's hotel. **LEFT:** Crowned by a glass roof soaring 150 feet, the Gaylord Opryland Resort's Delta garden is one of three indoor natural areas.

**PEOPLE & PLACES**

**RIGHT:** Resort guests can walk beside waterfalls that tumble down a man-made mountain in the Cascades. **FAR RIGHT:** The Cascades Terrace bar sits amid a forest of tropical trees and ferns.



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Hollis won the argument and soon the sun streamed in. "They only envisioned all the bad things that could happen," he says, smiling. "Fortunately I was too young—so I never thought it was ever going to go the wrong way."

**Trio of Gardens** Hollis continues to go the right way as caretaker for the resort's 50,000 tropical plants that beautify 8 acres of indoor gardens divided into three distinct settings—the Garden Conservatory, the Cascades, and the Delta.

The Garden Conservatory now boasts 10,000 tropical plants that include 215 species. "I do as much research as I can to find the best plant people to deal with," Hollis says as he walks through the Conservatory. A quiet man with a calming voice and an easy smile, he stops along the way to greet guests and answer their questions about the tropical treasure trove.

After completing the Garden Conservatory, Hollis and his staff created the Cascades with 8,200 tropical plants representing 449 species, many of which flower year-round. "I bought a collection of 50 palms from a gentleman who collected the seeds and raised them himself," he says. "Some of them turned out to be unique. They're kind of like raising children."

The next project, the Delta, required some 32 tractor trailers of plants. Topped



Tennessee, where he earned a degree in ornamental horticulture. He later interned at Longwood Gardens in Pennsylvania and supervised horticulture at Nashville's Cheekwood Botanical Garden and Museum of Art.

The plant pro takes a break to talk to a passing group of hotel guests. "They asked, 'Is it hard to grow things in here?'" Hollis says. "I told them, 'Not really. It all comes back to the light.'" ●

GAYLORD OPRYLAND RESORT HOTEL & CONVENTION CENTER: [www.gaylordhotels.com](http://www.gaylordhotels.com).

### Hollis's Hot Tips

Here are a few of Hollis's tips for successful xeriscape (water-saving) gardening during hot, dry summers in the South.

- Choose drought-tolerant shrubs such as American elderberry and butterfly bush and trees such as redbuds and magnolias.
- Convert conventional sprinklers to drip irrigation systems and connect downspouts to containers to better utilize rainwater.
- Mulch, mulch, mulch—pile it up around plants as much as 2 or 3 inches deep.

by a glass roof that rises 150 feet from the floor, the area includes a smaller-than-life Southern plantation, complete with an antebellum mansion flanked by magnolias. "We put in two magnolia trees before all the glass was in place," Hollis says. "My education told me they wouldn't flower without a cold period, and I didn't think they ever could—but they do!"

**Plants and People** While they're used to handling seeds and soil, Hollis and his staff of 50 are just as skillful when it comes to dealing with hotel guests. Highly visible while pruning and planting, they often stop to answer questions or help people find their way around the mammoth resort. "It's a people space first and a plant space second," Hollis says. "If we created the perfect conditions for plants, we'd all be sopping wet and have that kinky hair look. The comfort and humidity of the guests is far more important."

That respect for others has led Hollis down the green path to win awards for finding natural alternatives to chemical pesticides and fertilizers. "We work in a hotel so we don't want to use anything that's going to be harmful to the guests or anybody else," he says.

A Nashville native who started growing zinnias as a 6-year-old, Hollis first got his hands dirty professionally working in greenhouses at Vanderbilt University and the University of

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