

A Mother Nature PRODUCTION



The most popular show in Vegas, isn't on stage, it's in the Bellagio Conservatory



Photos by Jennifer Whitehair

Clockwise, from above: This is the first time the Conservatory has introduced live birds into its exhibit; Gardner Susie French places flowers in the exhibit; Lead gardner Sergio Rodriguez waters the flowers.

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Spring brings a myriad of flowers carpeting the conservatory in four distinct gardens – French, English, Japanese and Italian. Summer invokes memories of childhood with a Ferris wheel covered in sunflowers while frogs, lady bugs and snails created from thousands of cut blossoms populate the garden. Fall arrives with a burst of color from hundreds of pumpkins and foliage while humor is provided by a talking apple tree near an

old mill. Winter celebrates the holiday season where snowmen created from carnations frolic beside pecan-encrusted reindeers and a 45-foot tall pine tree.

Like a Broadway show, these floral theatrical productions take months of work and an army of talented people, plus a colorful cast of players — thousands of flowers, trees and plants — to pull off. Planning for each show begins two to three months before its debut.

Seven days in seven minutes

It takes more than 100 people working seven days to change out the Bellagio Conservatory exhibit. But you don't have to spend seven days to see all the work. Check out VEGAS.com's time-lapse video of the switch from the spring to summer exhibit. In just seven minutes, you can see seven days of work. Go to: <http://www.vegas.com/video/conservatory/>.

"What are we going to install? What will be the theme? What props are we going to use? How are we going to accomplish it?" These are just a few of the questions Garcia says the Bellagio's horticulture staff wrestles with.

"We have to be creative," he explains. "We have design meetings every week."

Ideas come from a variety of sources. The Bellagio has 120 people working on its horticulture staff in a variety of areas including the Conservatory, interior and exterior floral and grounds maintenance and floral design. This doesn't include the numerous employees from engineering, electrical, water design and more who all help contribute to the final product.

"We have to have all these skilled people to make this beauty," says Garcia.

The Conservatory staff is always listening, looking for the next inspiration and it's not just the hotel staff voicing an opinion during the design phase. Visitors to the garden play an active role in what gets installed.

"We always walk the Conservatory without a name tag so we are hearing the guests and we are learning from the guests what they want to see," says Garcia. "We never say never because we are always looking for that unique plant, that unique tree that people are going to talk about. We are open for anything."

Creating new and unique shows is a key part of the Conservatory's

attraction, according to Tim Hunter, Conservatory manager.

"I try to have different flowers in here, even if it's one different type of flower, so not every show looks the same," says Hunter. "That's the biggest challenge, finding something new so when you come back next summer you don't walk through and say 'Oh this is what they did last summer.' It's got to change every year somewhat, whether it be the props, the flowers or trees. It's got to be exciting every year, every show."

Design work continues up to the day the show opens as the Conservatory staff wrestles with any surprises that come up along the way.

The logistics of the show change-outs are staggering. Over seven days, the staff of 120 works 24-hours a day to transform the 13,573-square-foot conservatory.

More than 10,000 potted flowers and plants are ordered months in advance from suppliers in Southern California. The plants arrive shortly before the exhibit and are housed temporarily in a 40,000-square-foot, off-site greenhouse. Props, stored in a 24,000-square-foot warehouse, are trucked to the hotel.

Cranes help the staff position the larger pieces like 16-foot tall glass poppies and the 40-foot tall 1922 Ferris wheel used in the summer exhibit. Tunnels run under the Conservatory's floor to allow even more access.

Even after the change-out, work for the Conservatory staff doesn't end. Most of the watering is done by hand and every two weeks more than 10,000 potted flowers are switched out. The old plants are then recycled, providing mulch for the rest of the Bellagio. Ninety percent of the Conservatory is recycled.

This summer, the Conservatory introduced live birds into the exhibit. Guests can walk through a glassed-in aviary filled with vibrant-colored lorikeets and parakeets surrounded by colorful flowers and playful water features.

Conservatory employees spent weeks with an outside company learning the proper upkeep to ensure the health of the birds.

"We've got to make sure this looks perfect," Garcia says. "There is no room for error."

It's easy to get lost discussing the numbers when you talk about the Conservatory. But it's not the numbers that make the gardens the must-see show in Vegas. Numbers don't encompass the driving emotion behind the horticulture staff's work.

Ask Garcia, who came from a farm in El Salvador to Las Vegas to find his dream job, or Hunter who has worked for the Bellagio since its opening, why they do this and you get one answer – passion.

"It's in me, in my blood," Garcia explains.

"Other (Bellagio) departments want to work in horticulture," Hunter says. "Whenever we have an opening we just have floods of applications. What I need is someone who has the passion that wants to do this."

"You have to have that. Otherwise it doesn't work in here."



The summer exhibit has cold air balloons and water features as well as more than 10,000 flowers.