

LODGING

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The Garden Secret

Indoor Landscaping Is a Breath of Fresh Air for Hotel Guests and Employees

by Jessica Downey

Throughout hotels in Europe and Asia, and especially in countries like Holland and Japan, indoor landscaping is as common as tulips and chopsticks, because the cultural and social relevance is embedded in their way of life.

However, some hotel brands in the United States have made plant life and interior landscaping a top priority since their inception and even incorporated the practice into their brand standards. Nashville's Gaylord Opryland Resort and Convention Center features acres of lavish garden wonderland that run through the hotel's huge atrium. With 50,000 tropical plants including rare and exotic species, it provides a year-round attraction for guests who come from all over the world.

Embassy Suites requires that 50 percent of each hotel atrium be covered in live plants and water elements, such as waterfalls and

streams, and 20 percent of the decorative railings overlooking the atrium must incorporate living plant life.

Although interior landscaping adds another significant element to hotel operations, John Lee, president of brand marketing for Embassy Suites, says the practice adds irreplaceable value for the guests and makes the working environment much more pleasant for the hotel staff. Hotel guests experience Embassy Suites atriums differently, depending on the nature of their stay. "Particularly for travelers who are in this business bubble, it's a very cramped, rushed, and hectic time," he says. "You open the doors to an Embassy Suites, and there's a sense of rejuvenation and relaxation that really resonates with business travelers because of the trees and plants and the sound of water running over the rocks."

Although some hoteliers balk when they hear that a team of 20 full-time horticulturists maintains Opryland's luxurious greens, such extensive landscaping isn't necessary to obtain the benefits that come with interior plant life, says Mary Jane Gilhooley,

spokesperson for Plants at Work, a nationwide effort to educate businesses on the subject. She says many times hotels don't see the benefit of landscaping inside the venue as well as outside because of the cost and labor associated with the practice. "But before they rule it out they need to find out what plants can live in that environment and don't require as much maintenance," she explains. "There are so many misconceptions about what it takes to keep healthy plants, it drives me crazy."

How Does Your Garden Grow?

Determining which plants would bring about the most benefits within a given space is difficult for hoteliers to do on their own, unless they have the time for the research. Gilhooley says, "Unless you are doing something really minimal, it makes sense to outsource. It takes out the guesswork, and you don't have to train your whole staff. Outsourcing is smarter because it frees up your staff to be doing the work they need to be focusing on. It also ensures that the plants are being properly taken care of, and it's not that expensive. The reward-cost ratio is really on the

side of outsourcing.”

Lee says that although the cost varies from one hotel to another, “interior landscaping really doesn’t impact the overall per-key costs. We’ve never heard from an owner that it’s cost-prohibitive.”

The Embassy Suites San Diego/La Jolla in California, which has palm trees and Hawaiian tropical plants, outsources its interior landscaping needs, says Doug Ramsay, general manager of the hotel. “Like most Embassy Suites, the hotel employs a local company to refresh its lobby centerpiece floral arrangement and the flowers on the tabletops. Two additional people come in for 40 hours a week and care for the plants, trees and planters.” But Ramsay believes it’s worth the effort and expense to reap the rewards. “The greenery has a calming effect on the guests and team members alike,” he says. “From a guest standpoint, many arrive and start taking photos of the lobby atrium.”

Plants at Work spends the bulk of its financing on crunching data and disseminating information, and Gilhooley says research concludes without a doubt that plants add value to employees’ working environments, and productiveness, and therefore improves guests’ experiences in hotels.

Hotels can also keep guests in the lobby, gift shop, and atrium longer when the interior landscaping has a nature element, Gilhooley says. According to her company’s research, guest use of the atrium area or the snack bar increases almost four percent in hotels. The studies also demonstrated a drop in

anxiety among both men and women when plants, water, and light were in the vicinity, she says.

Although plants in the workplace and interior landscaping have increased gradually throughout the past three decades, Lee says in the United States interior landscaping ebbs and flows. “It’s cyclical - whereas in Europe and Asia it’s always been part of the picture,” he offers. “But more people today have an affinity toward nature than in the past. Today it’s not so much where they went but what they did when they got there, more so than I can ever recall in the past.”

Gilhooley says the Green Building Incentives have also made an impact on the interest in interior landscaping. “It’s really the idea that we’d better get into sustainability in our industries or we’re going to be in trouble,” she says. “It’s not just an ornamental frill, but it is providing the lungs of the venue.”