

## Denise Eichmann

FIND OUT WHAT GOES INTO DESIGNING, INSTALLING, AND MAINTAINING A GARDEN ON A CRUISE SHIP

**You've just installed a garden on Royal Caribbean's *Oasis of the Seas*.**

**What was your role?** We assisted in the selection of plants, brought them all onboard, and installed them. We also trained the gardening staff onboard Royal Caribbean. The garden is roughly the size of a football field: 50 feet across and 300 feet long. There are approximately 12,000 plants and more than 100 plant species.

**Why put a garden on a cruise ship?**

**Don't people just want more space to lounge and play shuffleboard?**

It's to enrich the guests' experience. People that cruise a lot and have been to all of the islands are limited in what they can do if they don't get off the ship. So by creating a garden, you've just created another place where people can go on the ship and actually embrace, enjoy, and become intimate with the surroundings without having to sit out in the sun on the pool deck. Many people like to do that, of course, but others like to find a nice shady spot underneath a tree and read a book.

The ship's garden is an intimate place, where people can relax under a canopy of trees and dine outside. The garden's ambience at night is just incredible, too. It's just a new way to bring nature into what, otherwise, can be so much theatrical candy.

**How hard was it to select plants for this project?** The ship sails exclusively in the Caribbean, so all of the plants had to work in USDA Hardiness Zones 8 to 10. The biggest thing we considered was salt tolerance. The winds, obviously, carry salt spray that leaves deposits on the plants, and that causes water to move out of the plants. Salt in the soil has a similar effect. But the garden is on deck 8 [the middle] of the ship, and rising above it on each side are six levels of staterooms. So it's kind of enclosed—similar to what you'd see in a large-scale hotel, where you can look down into an atrium. Although the rain carries salt, we really don't have a lot of salt being carried by the wind. So we didn't have to look for plants that were highly salt tolerant—just salt resistant. That gave us a really big plant palette to work with.

**Does wind affect bold-leaved plants?** Yes, but Royal Caribbean built in some spoilers on the upper levels of the ship, which



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deflect the wind so that it doesn't come down into the garden.

**Do they do that just for the garden?**

There were many studies done for its effect not only on plants but also on people.

**What about insects?** We don't want to act as a transport vessel to bring pests into the United States. We worked with the USDA on not using certain varieties of plants that have agricultural importance, like coffee. We removed that from the plant list because coffee grows all over the islands, and there are apparently

certain types of pests that might get onboard the ship, be carried with the coffee plants, and get off the ship in Florida.

**Are guests another "pest" you have to account for?** We really don't get a lot of patron abuse, but we do consider it. The perimeter of the beds is mostly liriopie; so if people sit on it, it pops right up. But we really haven't had much of a problem.

**How organic is this operation?** Very. We worked extensively with the health- and public-assurance people and submitted documentation on all the products that we would be using. It was greatly researched. And none of the water that's used in the garden has anything to do with the water that's used for drinking or for any other purpose on the ship. It's isolated water. And it doesn't make it back into the ocean.

**How much maintenance is required?** We don't have high-maintenance plants, so the three full-time gardeners spend a lot of time grooming things. One of the things that we need to do is to maintain firebreaks. We are constantly pruning the trees so they don't get up in the balconies or the fire zones. Safety is a priority.

**So what is the coolest project you've ever worked on?** This is, definitely, the coolest project we've ever worked on—by far.

**Is there any chance that I could get a firsthand look at the garden? A free cruise, perhaps?** I don't know, but I doubt it. I haven't gotten *my* free cruise yet.

—Interview conducted by Steve Aitken, editor

Photo: courtesy of Denise Eichmann