

Goodbye to the Garden from director Brian Holley

Five gardens and reconfigured areas have maximized the garden's potential and won it conservation awards as well.



Brian Holley, former executive director of the Naples Botanical Gardens, peruses the gardens that he spent over 11 years helping to create and establish into what it is today.

Seeing former Naples Botanical Garden Executive Director Brian Holley without a hard hat is a shock to patrons and media who have bounced around construction sites in golf carts with him for the last 10 years.

It's a sight even most garden employees don't get often. Holley came to Naples to be its executive director in 2006, having just brushed the dirt off his hands from a greenhouse project at Cleveland Botanical Garden, and he never really stopped building here until last week.

The revised Florida Garden, with an undulating creek flanked by Florida natives or Florida-friendly plants, was christened Jan. 11, five days after Holley figuratively handed the keys to new Executive Director Donna McGinnis.

"I won't totally retire," he conceded. "I'm going to do a little consulting."

But he admitted, as he looked around at the garden that has been his life for so long, that he would need to decompress a bit: He's planned a trip out West with his daughter. He's looking forward to summers back in his native Canada, too. But he's just been presented with a lifetime VIP membership, so his last day to walk the gardens won't be his departure day Friday.

Ten years of blooming

Board member Jim Lagrippe worked with Holley for his entire time here. He says he pushed Holley to come to Naples the first day they met, after Holley offered a presentation in Cleveland about its botanical garden. Holley was executive director there at the time.

"When I met him, I got the sense of instant credibility which Brian Holley has. That's what was really magical about him," Lagrippe recalled. "He just got his arms around whatever he was involved in. I don't care if it was financially or botanically.

"When you're a fledgling like we were ... you needed someone who brought in instant credibility."

The garden clearly was in the bud stage. Its biggest structure when Holley arrived was a boxy, onetime strip mall at the corner of Thomasson Drive and Bayshore Road. (It now houses the administration offices, which were given a livelier color and face-lift fringe of leafy Florida botanicals.) A single garden housed its beginning botanical collection.

From that beginning, Holley built what has bloomed into Florida's second-largest botanical garden in physical space. Educationally and socially, it could contend for the top spot:

» It holds 80 developed acres, with eight named gardens and three more niche gardens, over the 170 acres it covers. Its year-old visitor center — with gift shop, a café and a lecture hall — are all LEED-certified, meaning it measures up to the highest architectural standards for green building design and operation.

» A cooperative classroom building houses FGCU horticultural and botanical studies. The university's annual ["Moonlight on the Marsh" lecture series](#) sponsored by the Everglades Wetland Research Park opens in Kapnick Hall at 7 p.m. Thursday.

» Its education program extends from medicinal plant classes to birding walks, lectures on the area's native bees and a children's weekend series. The garden has arrangements that bring in yoga, tai chi, watercolor artists and writers groups.

» The highly popular "dogs in the garden" feature offers specific hours visitors can bring their pets and is a model for those being considered at other gardens.

During Holley's tenure, there has rarely been a blank day on the calendar.

A cooperative relationship with Artis—Naples has brought six of its Baker Museum show sculptures as Origami in the Garden. The garden has hosted its own exhibits, including a life-size animatronic Dinosaurs in the Garden, with T-rexes that roared; and two Lego sculpture exhibitions.

African artists twice spent weeks creating their distinctive stone sculpture onsite; several of their pieces still rise from the landscape around the gardens. An annual Lights in the Garden festival has become a December tradition. Two concert series in Kapnick Hall this year are divided between [rock](#) and [classical piano](#).

Holley's vivid memories are of working with the wilderness he had inherited, killing off the invasive melaleuca trees. It was a painfully slow process that required drilling into every tree and stifling its growth by injecting herbicide into its connective tissue.

"For the first few years the birding tower area looked like a ghost forest," he recalled with a sigh. In the spirit of conservation, all the melaleuca was shredded into mulch.

Holley had also seen the limited horizon that flat Florida landscape could offer a visitor. Part of the design challenge was to give landscape architects a more rolling terrain to work with.

"You can just imagine moving 250,000 square yards of soil. That's 20,000 dump trucks of soil, and those aren't the small trucks," he recalled. But the result was what Holley calls "viewsheds" that allow visitors to look across and down to more of its gardens.

One of his own favorite spots, known as the Smith Prow, is close by the entrance to the children's garden of the same name. It allows the visitor a vista of the Brazilian plaza mural by Burle Marx and several other gardens at the same time.

Board President Thomas McCann recalled Holley's prescience in estimating the spot for it: "When they finished the garden in 2009, after planning it 2007, that prow was within 2 inches of where Brian thought it should be. And it was a melaleuca forest seven years before that."

Counting every tree

A walk through the garden with Holley still amazes him: "He'll turn around and say, 'Where's that tree that was there yesterday?' To have an 80-acre garden and know where every tree in it is just amazing," he said.

Even more amazing is Holley's dedication to trees that — as long as they fit with the garden's mission — bring some history with them. As many trees as possible have come from local yards, with a dual purpose.

"It's a combination of protecting our horticultural heritage and also sort of adding a level of age or maturity to our garden," Holley explained.

The newly designed Florida Garden has a bottle brush tree rescued from the parking lot of the former St. George and the Dragon restaurant on Fifth Avenue South, along with the slightly dented sign next to it announcing as the patrons' parking lot.

When the Pelican Bay Country Club re-landscaped its grounds, the gardens gained its formidable palm trees, which now stand in the Florida Garden.

Brian Gallagin, the garden's director of horticulture, spotted a huge ficus tree, its roots entangled in large stones, that became a perfect entryway tree for the Asian garden. The garden got permission to move it, stones and all. Because of its origin, its nickname is more practical than zen: the FedEx tree.

Nearly two dozen trees from the Naples estate of avid amateur horticulturalist Elsie Page joined the inventory several years ago. And one huge family tree sailed from Marco Island to a waiting truck that hauled it in.

"He could think like a designer. He could look at something and say, 'I think that would look better somewhere else.' And he was right," recalled Dave Catron, a garden volunteer who became Holley's partner for his one avocation away from the garden, a Sunday morning golf game. "He's very insightful, he has vast knowledge, and he's just an all-around nice guy."

"Before Brian came," McCann said, "we had been struggling with what kind of garden we want. We knew we wanted a world-class garden, but we didn't know what that would be." Holley quizzed everyone and determined to seek the best architects for those requests.

"He's a visionary," former Chairman Judy Sproul declared, voicing what most people enjoy about Naples Botanical Garden but don't necessarily know. "He found the very best architects in the world for us."



Holley came to the Naples landmark when it was in its infancy, with only several gardens and a small corner building. Today it encompasses five major gardens, one of the largest plumeria collections in the world, and two additional minor gardens for orchids and Florida unique plants. Holley will officially retire this month.(Photo: Luke Franke/Naples Daily News)Buy Photo