



Rescued by their creator's great-grandson in 1995, the Jardins de Métis

now host an annual modern garden festival. Ian Hodgson visits this horticultural haven in Canada

Extremely rewarding



Les Jardins de Métis/Claude Bouchard

Top: Snuggled between the Métis River and the St Lawrence River, the gardens enjoy a favourable microclimate and dramatic location

Above: In winter, the low mounds of *Pinus pumila* edging the path from the house are transformed into snow-covered buttons

THE JARDINS DE MÉTIS nestle in the crook of one of the shallow bays and headlands that scallop the coastline of the Gaspé peninsula, 320km (200 miles) northeast of Québec. In a country noted for climatic extremes the gardens enjoy a favoured location at the confluence of the Métis River, long celebrated for its salmon fishing, and the mighty St Lawrence River.

The geography is on a massive scale. Here at the mid-point of the seaway the opposite shore is a hazy blue mirage 55km (34 miles) distant and on clear days seals and whales are visible patrolling the tides that flow into the Atlantic off Newfoundland, 650km (400 miles)



Les Jardins de Métis/Robert Wilson Reford





Derek St. Romaine

eastward. Water is the physical and philosophical heart that beats life and vitality into the 16ha (40 acres) that are Les Jardins de Métis.

Winters in Canada are cold and cruel; even here in the south of the country temperatures plummet to -25°C (-13°F) or lower. From November to April snows fill the brook that cuts through the gardens' protective shroud of lichen-whiskered woodland. In summer, leafy tree canopies trap cool, humid air, while ghostly frets periodically roll in from the St Lawrence. All combine to sustain the exuberant planting of 3,000 native and exotic herbaceous plants, trees and shrubs.

Trial and error

Physically these gardens should, perhaps, never have been. Their success owes much to trial, error and experimentation, particularly in the pioneer days of 1926 when their creator Elsie Reford first started to scratch the soil, initially on her doctor's orders as an alternative to salmon fishing. Back then indigenous horticultural literature was scant—gardening was not popular in Canada—but thanks to her dedication the gardens flourished yet remained little known.

As with all gardens once the guiding hand of the creator is removed, their character and purpose can >

Above: Exuberantly planted, the sunny Long Walk bursts forth with a dramatic summer display of lilies, delphiniums, peonies and roses

Left: Elsie Reford began creating the garden in 1926, trying 'anything and everything that she thought might survive'



Above: Elsie's beloved *Meconopsis betonicifolia* flourish in the stream gardens in midsummer

Right: Lilies were another of Elsie's passions and stout clumps of *Lilium martagon* var. *cattaniae* bask in sunny spots

be jeopardised. So it was here. But in 1996 the Jardins de Métis again rose to prominence and were declared a site of national historic importance. The place is famed for its plantings of meconopsis and primula, a 90-m (100-yd) long mixed border, beds of roses and, inaugurated last year, an International Festival of Gardens, the first outside Europe.

Revitalisation

'By all accounts Elsie Reford was a formidable and determined lady,' explains Alexander Reford, her great-grandson and, since 1995, the Director of the gardens, whose own brand of quiet determination and vision is responsible for its recent revitalisation.

'She was meticulous in her habits and kept a diary of her experiences and thoughts. This proved an indispensable archive enabling us to interpret what remained of the garden and to recreate much of the spirit of the place,' he says.

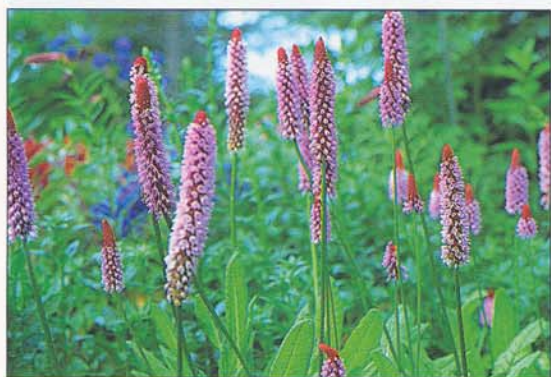
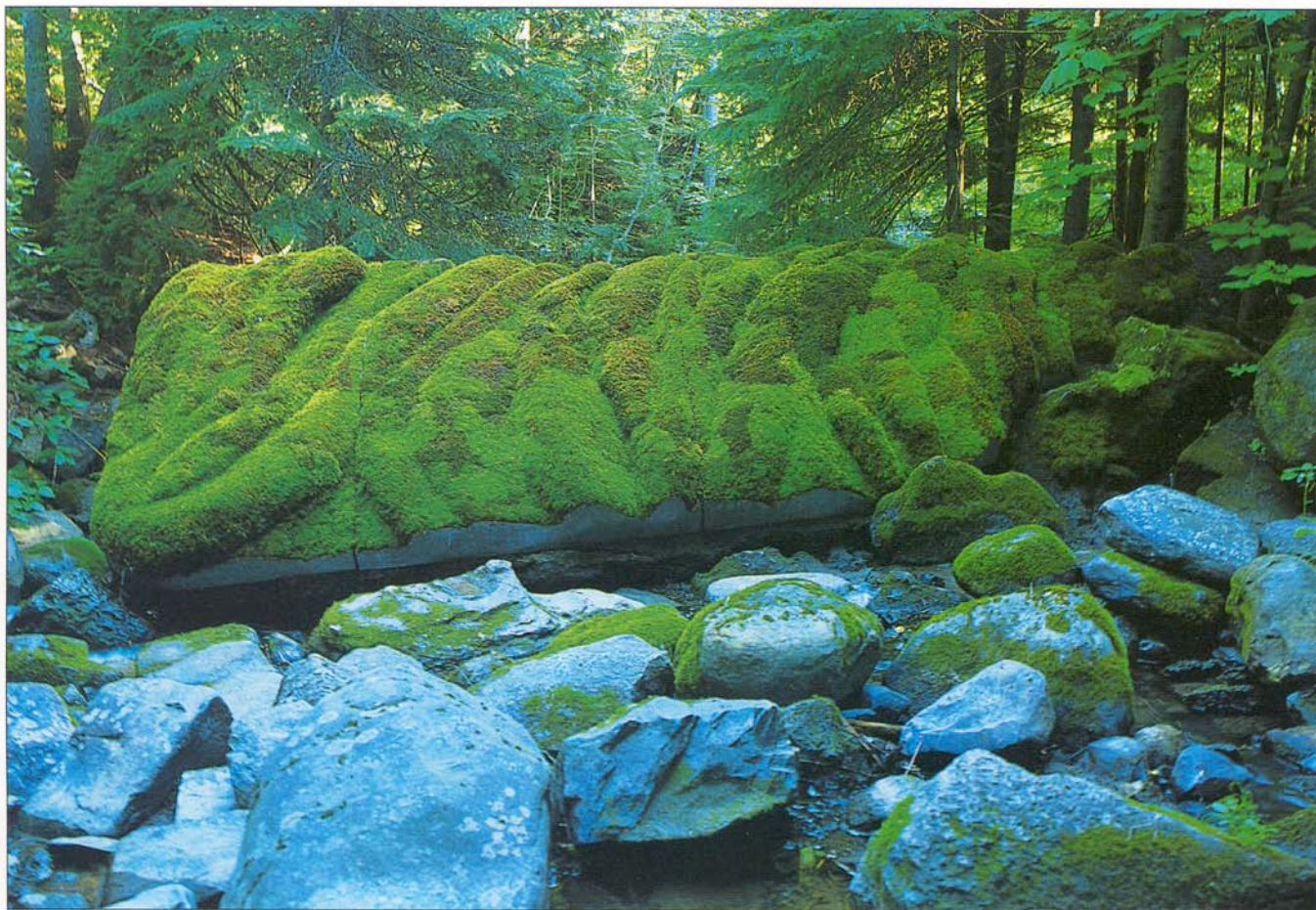
Born into comfortable society in 1872 Elsie was given free use of her uncle's 37-room fishing lodge Estevan (not yet Jardins de Métis) in 1890. In 1918, aged 46 and married to noted shipping magnate Robert Reford, she became the legal owner of the property. She created a vegetable garden, but her passion for ornamental plants was inflamed in 1929 when she joined the Royal Horticultural Society. From there her enthusiasm grew and all manner of



seeds and plants were imported from England to furnish the fledgling garden. She corresponded with noted gardeners of the day and in 1939 had an article published in the RHS *Lily Year Book* recounting her experiences of growing lilies at Estevan Lodge.

'She tried anything and everything that might survive and quickly became a talented gardener,' says Alexander. 'She even succeeded with the giant lily *Cardiocrinum* but we haven't managed to grow it.'

'Elsie became interested in crab apples as their Japanese character appealed and she needed hardy trees that flowered reliably. She was in contact with Isabella Preston who presented her with some new un-named hybrids. They thrived and are now an important part of our spring display collectively



known as the Crab Apple Garden. It may surprise British gardeners but we can't grow evergreens such as *Ilex aquifolium* (English holly) here. It only makes a couple of feet. Our purple-leaved Japanese maple was one of Elsie's original plantings of the 1930s, but is only 1.2m (4ft) tall. The gnarled trunk belies its true age.'

Seasonal quirks

The growing season is a strange affair. Spring is brisk and truncated, starting in late April or May after the snows have melted, and quickly becoming summer, creating some unusual floral admixtures in its wake. In late July, beneath the crabs, pale yellow Asiatic *Primula sikkimensis* flowers with the pink pokers of *P. vialii* and crimson-eyed *P. pulverulenta* matched with a froth of

astilbe and pools of *Browallia* 'Starlight Blue', grown as an annual and bedded out for summer.

Nearby, the mixed border known as the Long Walk boasts drifts of stately *Lilium regale* 'Album', punctuated by spires of azure-blue 'Delamosa' and 'Blue Jay' delphiniums. The cherry-pink polyantha rose 'Ellen Poulson' nestles next to the last few blooms of sugar-pink peony 'Sarah Bernhardt', while other floribundas such as dark scarlet 'Pinocchio' and 'Evertin' and polyanthas 'Coralin' and 'Gloria Mundi' announce that summer has really arrived.

The interplay of tree cover, clearing and the banks of the brook that dissects the gardens is used to great effect. Dappled light protects delicate woodland plants from the midday sun. A substantial living sculpture of mosses in the bed of Page's Brook astounds visitors once they attune to the gloom. Conceived as a landscape seen from the air, it was created by Francine Larivée between 1993–96 and stimulates much comment.

Stout clumps of *Lilium martagon*, successful here in many of its forms, bask elsewhere in the sunlight. Drifts of *Meconopsis betonicifolia* (Himalayan poppy), the signature plant of the gardens, enliven woodland glades in early July with their heavenly blueness. 'We have around 300 plants on display at any one time,' says Alexander. 'We propagate by division or raise new plants from our own saved seed.' >

Above: Francine Larivée's living moss sculpture in the bed of Page's Brook is generally easy to maintain, although it sometimes needs patching up after moss has been washed away when the brook is in full spate

Left: The gardens' growing season is a strange affair, with the pink pokers of *Primula vialii* blooming in late July



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International Garden Festival

1 Extracts from Elsie Reford's diaries were etched on slate tablets in Jennifer Luce's 'Transfusion'

2 Before entering the festival, visitors were encouraged to make sculptures from artefacts in a sandpit

3 Jill Billington's 'Clearings' explored the relationship between the natural and cultivated world

4 'Le jardin du repos' by design group PLANT/BranchPLANT featured a sepulchral bed, chaise longue and a screened log bench

5 In his Blue Stick Garden, Claude Cormier translated the design principles of the herbaceous border into a colourful array of painted sticks

6 Peter Fianu and Bernard Saint-Denis combined nature and technology in 'Living Room'

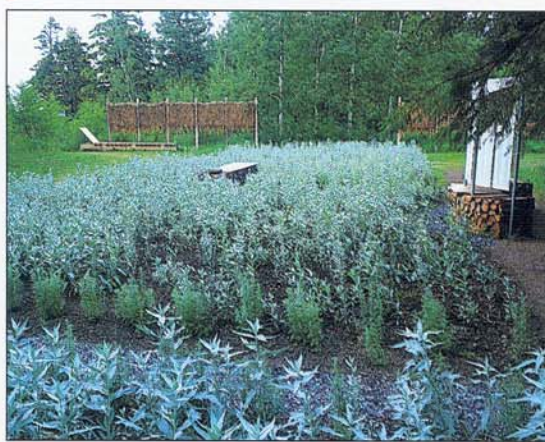
7 Marie-Chrystine Landry's 'Le jardin des appels' contained a planted version of SOS in morse code

8 Landscape partnership L'espace DRAR used recycled and living materials to imitate the sea

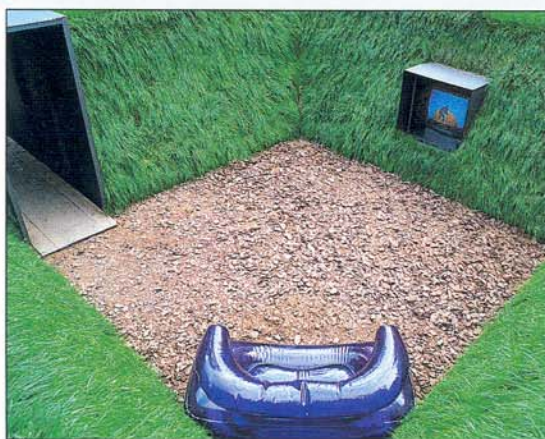
9 The history of plant introduction formed the theme for Susan Herrington's 'Surf and Turf'



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Hand of fate

Alexander is not afraid of challenge. In 1994, aged 32, this Oxford-trained historian was Dean of St Michael's College at the University of Toronto. Then he visited Métis to undertake research on Robert Reford, his great-great-grandfather and Elsie's father-in-law, for the *Dictionary of Canadian Biography* and learned that it was about to be privatised and that the gardens could fall victim to commercial development.

When Elsie moved out in 1959, 12 years before her death, she gave the lodge and estate to her son Bruce, a retired Irish Guards officer. Reticent to embrace such an undertaking he put the property up for sale.

The Quebec Government stepped in, intending to use it as a facility to propagate Nordic plants. Instead Estevan was eventually opened as a tourist attraction, renamed Jardins de Métis. By the early 1990s more than 100,000 people a year came to visit but it was not enough to make ends meet, at which point in 1994 fate took a hand and Alexander was reunited with his great-grandmother's horticultural legacy.

'I had only met her twice as a boy. Then I discovered her diaries and read of her love for the garden and the landscape of the region. She was very talented and clearly ahead of her time. I identified with the passionate spirit she embodied in her writings.'

Inspired but without horticultural experience, he founded a not-for-profit corporation which won the bid for the site. Alexander's first challenge was to work with resident horticulturist Patricia Gallant to refurbish the plantings, reintroducing some of the plants mentioned in Elsie's prose. Stridently hued beds of begonias were replaced with bold plantings of hostas, lilies, *Dicentra* and, of course, *Meconopsis*.

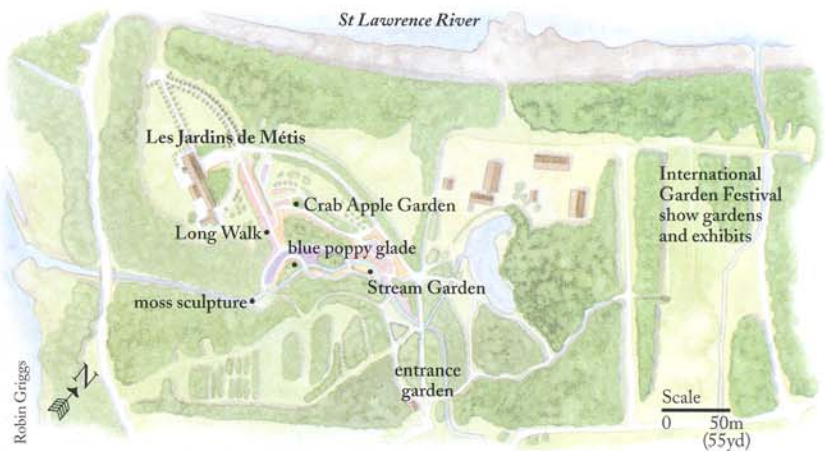
'Besides introducing good garden plants we are also making people aware of natives such as *Thalictrum*, *Disporum*, *Smilacina* and *Sanguisorba*. We hope to introduce displays of rare and endangered plants of Quebec and have worked closely with groups such as the Hardy Fern Foundation of the Pacific Northwest.'

Festival of Gardens

Aware that commercial demands could undermine the fragile character of his great-grandmother's garden, Alexander took the bold step of introducing a venture that utilised unused parts of the estate, and fitted neatly with the short summer and tourist season.

'Our International Festival of Gardens grew out of a visit I made with landscape architect Philippe Poullaouec-Gonidec and architect Denis Lemieux to the Chaumont festival in France four years ago. I was impressed by what I saw and thought it might work here,' he enthuses. 'We have to make our garden different from others to tempt people to come. So the festival goes beyond the boundaries of the parent garden and is more directly connected with the local landscape and culture and provides an opportunity for dialogue between past and present.'

Such sensitive ideals require careful fostering and



Alexander chose Denis Lemieux as Festival Director. They assembled 13 artists and designers of landscape and gardens, including Britain's Jill Billington who has designed at Chelsea and Hampton Court.

Their respective exhibits are all thought provoking, challenging common conceptions of what gardens are all about. Many took their cue from the seaboard location or made reference to an aspect of the parent garden. On arrival visitors were invited to build sculptures from a range of artifacts left in sandpits.

The exhibit that most excited visitors, including myself, was landscape architect Claude Cormier's 'Blue Stick Garden'. Using the basic premise of the herbaceous border with painted sticks substituting coloured blossoms his bichromatic, geometric surfaces created drama, surprise and humour, providing the visitor with an exhilarating visual experience.

Literal living

I liked the use of turf to represent the movement of waves in 'Not in my Backyard', a garden by Patricia Lussier and Anna Radice. Embodying principles of recycling and ecology, the design melded together rolls of mesh, plantations of grass such as *Calamagrostis x acutiflora* 'Karl Foerster', pathways of crushed glass and carpets of blue pansies and yellow nasturtiums.

Turf also played a part in the literal creation of the 'Living Room' by Bernard Saint-Denis and Peter Fianu, complete with video screen and seat. Other designs were more contemplative and sculptural, such as 'Transfusion' by Jennifer Luce, which drew its influences from Elsie Reford's life and writings.

'Unfortunately some visitors expected a flower show with floral exhibits rather than a festival of gardens,' says Alexander. 'You can't pre-judge people's reactions. It was personal experience in life which determined the response, not age. I think that discordance in garden design is to be encouraged. Les Jardins de Métis can play a role for both traditional plant lovers and designers, developing synergy between the two.'

With so much accomplished in such a short time, it is clear that this is only just the beginning. 🍷

Ian Hodgson is Editor of *The Garden*



Above: Like his great-grandmother Elsie, garden Director Alexander Reford is unafraid of challenge. He established the International Garden Festival after a visit to Chaumont in France, and sees it as 'an opportunity for dialogue between past and present'

Further information
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jardinsmetis.com).
Website: (www.
jardinsmetis.com).
Open: June to mid-
October, daily,
8.30am-5pm (6.30pm
in July and August).
Admission: \$12 (adult)

The second
International Garden
Festival at Les Jardins
de Métis will be held
from 23 June to end of
September, 2001