

Reford Gardens evolves with times

Musical brunches, gourmet evenings, a museum and a festival among the complementary additions to Gaspé's landmark

BY ROCHELLE LASH, SPECIAL TO THE GAZETTE JUNE 26, 2013



Pierre-Olivier Ferry, the chef at Reford Gardens, plans dinner in his new herb and vegetable space, Le Fotager.

Fusion in the forest.

The historic Reford Gardens, also known as Les Jardins de Métis, a landmark of the Gaspé, embraces much more than flowers and shrubs. It's a genteel theme park where nature, culture, design, history and cuisine converge on the banks of the St. Lawrence River.

This seasonal ode to nature is the legacy of one determined woman, Elsie Reford, the wife and daughter of powerful men who found her own calling, planting and cultivating for more than 30 years in the mid-1900s. "Green" long before eco-ventures became a trend, the site is now a National Historic Site of Canada, outstanding for the scope of the exotic and indigenous flora and their success in a difficult climate.

In 2012, Reford Gardens marked 50 years of being open to the public. Always evolving, the venue now has a gift shop, a new museum of antique tools and an online boutique that sells books, blue poppy seeds and homemade, homegrown delicacies like honey and wild blueberry and lavender

spread.

The gardens run musical brunches and literary teas on Sunday afternoons and occasional gourmet evenings, including one on July 28 with guest chefs from the acclaimed restaurant, Les 400 Coups in Old Montreal.

The newest garden is Le Potager, which supplies chef Pierre-Olivier Ferry with herbs and vegetables. Reford Gardens has two lunch spots: the formal Estevan Lodge, once the private fishing getaway of the aristocratic Reford family, and the new Blue Poppy Café, which serves light fare like lobster rolls and fiddlehead salads.

Elsie's great-grandson, Alexander Reford, the director of the gardens and the steward of this precious botanical collection, is also charged with keeping the venue hip and diverse. The annual International Garden Festival is an exhibition of contemporary "land art," innovative, large-scale structures of glass, metal, stone and marble built to interface with the earth, trees and streams.

One installation, Tiny Taxonomy, is a copse of cylinders filled with the oft-overlooked plants of the forest floor. It's by Rosetta Sarah Elkin of Montreal, who teaches at Graduate School of Design at Harvard University.

"The Garden Festival is an avant-garde blend of art and nature," Reford said, "and it's about as far from my great-grandmother's vision as you can get."

Even Elsie's own flower beds were a departure from the formal, decorative landscaping that had been popular for centuries. The descendants of her colourful beauties flourish in an untamed natural forest of towering evergreens, wild ferns and tangled grasses. Rustic footbridges meander over a raging brook, giant boulders stud a hillside and birds flutter over ponds. And 3,500 species of plants bloom at various times after a long, cold Gaspé winter, as if to say: "Hey, look, we made it."

"Our constant challenge is nature. It is both our ally and our enemy," Reford said. "The deep snow cover insulates the roots in winter, and the plants thrive in the moist summer air, but partridges and insects eat the buds and the cool temperatures threaten frost even in late spring.

"It's unpredictable. Some summers we don't even turn on the sprinklers."

I visited on June 1 when the temperature was 8 C. in Grand Métis and 30 C. in Montreal. Sure enough, Elsie's white tulips were just coming up and the buxom pink peonies hadn't yet bloomed. The Alpine corner of vibrant blue gentians and fritalleria looked hardy, but the fragile, tiny petals of bloodroot, with a lifespan of about one week, were already "fanées" for the season.

Still waiting for their moment in the sun were the famous blue poppies and a variety of lilies. By now, the English-style debutantes of The Long Walk will have come out: roses, delphiniums, rhododendrons and lilacs.

To warm up for my visit, I bought the book *Elsie's Paradise, The Reford Gardens*, written by

Alexander, with photographs by Louise Tanguay. I was intrigued by the slice of upper-crust Montreal history and lifestyles of the Golden Square Mile. Elsie's father was Robert Meighen, president of Lake of the Woods Milling Company, the largest flour millers in the British Empire.

Her husband, Robert Wilson Reford, was on the board of Cunard Steamship Lines and the couple lived in a mansion on Drummond St. She inherited the Gaspé estate from her uncle, Lord Mount Stephen, the founder of the Canadian Pacific Railway in the 1880s.

Elsie had been an equestrienne, deer hunter and salmon fisherman, but after appendicitis, her doctor asked her to stop strenuous activity and perhaps "take up gardening." She did, with a vengeance, eventually becoming a horticulturalist with scientific knowledge and nurturing flora that turned out to be as resilient as she was.

I have a weak spot for gift shops, but I have seen it all, so it's difficult to seduce me. At Reford Gardens, I found an item perfect for someone who has everything. A local horticulturist, Jean Rocheleau, creates one-of-a-kind hybrid day lilies that take eight years to cultivate.

You can buy one and name it yourself, as a tribute to a friend, family member or a favourite pet, and register the name with the American Hemerocallis Daylily Society.

So it's not only diamonds that are forever.

IF YOU GO:

Reford Gardens/Les Jardins de Métis: 418-775-2222, www.refordgardens.com, www.jardinsdemetis.com; 200 Route 132, Grand-Métis; open until Oct. 6; admission \$18, with discounts for seniors and juniors; free for 13 and under. Lunch served Mon.-Sat. in the Blue Poppy Café and Estevan Lodge. Lodging packages are available.

Sundays at the Gardens: musical brunches, \$35, Estevan Lodge, 10 a.m.-2 p.m., Sundays until Sept. 1; literary teas, \$8, at 4 p.m., July 14, Aug. 4, 11, 25, Sept. 15, 29.

Fridays at the Gardens: animation for children, 1-4 p.m., July 5-Aug. 16.

International Garden Festival runs until Sept. 29.

Culinary evenings: \$45-\$200, July 28, Aug. 16, 23.

Shakespeare in the Gardens: July 7 & 8, A Midsummer Night's Dream, \$20, free for 13 and under.

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