

# *It's worth flocking to these gardens*

Colourful rubber boots made for walking at Quebec's International Garden Festival and adjacent Reford Gardens

Hydro Quebec's  
exhibit: Bon Arbre  
Au Bon Endroit >  
Souvenir d'Enfance  
at the International  
Garden Festival  
**PREVIOUS PAGE**  
Plastic flamingos gather  
in one part of the  
Veil Garden at  
the International  
Garden Festival



Tilt from the International Garden Festival.

BY KATHRYN STORRING  
PHOTOGRAPHY • DWIGHT STORRING

Visitors can be forgiven for looking for garden pixies while poking around the International Garden Festival in Quebec. Who but mischievous, impish creatures could infuse landscaping with such whimsy, drama, imagination – and occasional madness?

Oh sure, flowers, shrubs and trees play significant roles, especially in the main grounds of the magnificent Reford Gardens, a national historic site also called Les Jardins de Métis. With 3,000 species, cultivars and varieties of plants, there's lots

to take in, even during a late-August visit. More about that later.

But the main reason for our trek to this site on the south side of the St. Lawrence River, at the gateway to the Gaspé Peninsula, was the adjacent festival, which has been running since 2000. And it didn't disappoint.

It's a place where colourful rubber boots on poles help deliver a message about invasive species. It's also a place where adventurous visitors can pop on a pair of those boots and wade through a shallow pool.

By welcoming visitors over more than three months – June 23 until October this

year – the festival also celebrates the joys of gardening over a long season.

There are more than 25 exhibits each year, the work of about 70 architects, landscape architects, designers and visual artists from several countries. Most installations are long running, evolving over the years, but a jury also selects a small group of newcomers for each season.

The festival is laid out in a giant L. The main area, which stretches along a wooded section of Reford Gardens, is chopped into an orderly grid of 10-by-20-metre spaces. The plots in the leg that parallels the St. Lawrence are more mysterious, dipping into

the woods in intriguing rooms.

But let's be clear: The festival does not showcase elaborately coiffed botanical gardens. Nor is it a designers' showcase to be admired from afar. This is a place where guests can dive right in.

Not that all do. Well trained by do-not-touch tourist sites, many of our fellow visitors last August politely viewed the various installations from the pathway while reading the descriptive panel. They obviously missed the word "interactive" on the brochure. And they missed out on the fun. The festival is part artistic vision, part educational platform and part adult



playground.

The most obvious example is the “Veil Garden,” where wooden bridges resemble a play structure in Kitchener’s Victoria Park. Well, not quite. The wooden flooring is occasionally steep and uneven, the chain-link sides an essential part of the structure. However, the smiles of those adults who walk it speak to its zany appeal. At the highest level, visitors peer through clumps of trees. Around the bottom, plastic pink flamingos forage among the ferns on one side while slender purple birdhouses poke out of the groundcover on the other.

A treehouse, almost invisible within its protective greenery of willows and poplars, rewards visitors who venture inside “Le Bois de biais et sa folie.” A curved staircase leads up and up to a platform that’s perfect for spying on the visitors below.

We almost missed one of the more outlandish exhibits, appropriately named “I Like to Move It.” It is set into woods, and our eyes were locked onto an interesting clearing up ahead as we passed it. A couple’s uncontrollable laughter made us turn around. There, just off the path, a man was pushing a tree through the forest! The trees in the exhibit are anchored into deep planters and mounted into a set of tracks for easy movement – instant landscape design.

Few visitors can resist zipping through “Making Circles in the Water,” a series of nine zebra-striped boards that line up to form a dazzling tunnel that leads to the St. Lawrence River. Still, this too begs inspection. Step this way or that, and see how the artistic perspective changes.

This is also true of “Jardin M,” a cluster of large oddball architectural shapes at the far side of the festival lot. Tall plants surround them as if they are an abandoned construction site – or perhaps an upscale play fort. Walk through the five structures, and look back – the angles shape-shift as you go.

As in nature, the results can be bold and brazen or they can be hidden gems waiting to be discovered in a grove of trees, such as Réflexions Colorées, a six-metre reflective triangle of coloured glass.

Some exhibits invite quiet introspection.



At first glance, “TiiLT,” the creation of two Winnipeg designers, seems inspired by the Sydney Opera House, its fabric sails rising from the earth, catching the sun and the shadows. Oh, but are they really sails? Wander among the two dozen structures and notice the pillow-like items within; perhaps they are tents. Better still, notice how they pivot at the flick of a hand. Interaction changes everything.

Next door is the eye-catching “Line Garden,” an abstract montage of black and white commercial barrier tape. The long stretches of tape mimic orderly ticket lineups at popular events, but these passageways mush together and lead nowhere. Except at one end, where lounge chairs invite visitors to enjoy the shade under a thicket of plastic pieces. The air is cool here and the rustling plastic is soothing.

Even Hydro Quebec gets in on the fun with an exhibit called “Bon arbre au bon endroit.” One suspects the designer was a hydro linesperson gone mad. Striking white poles have been erected here, there and everywhere, and the white “hydro” lines are clustered and swoop toward the ground.

Pole beans – and Jack and the Bean Stalk



– have inspired “La maison de Jacques.” Beans were planted in the spring, with cords coaxing their long tendrils upward over the wooden framework. Fat stepping stones lead visitors into the structure’s various rooms. In late August, the plants are healthy and some are still blooming, some short and some tall enough to make Jack proud. “Dead Garden II” sounds like a home gardener’s nightmare, but in this strange

**THIS PAGE**  
INTERNATIONAL GARDEN FESTIVAL  
TOP: Jardin M  
BOTTOM: Se mouiller (la belle échappée)

**FACING PAGE**  
REFORD GARDENS  
TOP: A section of woodland trail  
BOTTOM: For these colourful flowers, it’s time for their close-up





sculpture by a Brazilian designer, logs hang haphazardly in white corridors, turning into shimmering ghosts when viewed from the outside.

After more than an hour immersed in the festival's sensory overload, the quiet beauty of the adjacent historic gardens, just a forest trail away, is a soothing place to recover.

The garden's creator, Elsie Reford, inherited the estate, complete with a fishing camp called Estevan, from her uncle in 1918. In 1926, while she was convalescing from surgery at age 54, her doctor suggested she dial back her various outdoor pursuits. Perhaps gardening might be appropriate.

The doctor probably did not envision the creation of a private paradise covering eight hectares (20 acres).

Indeed, Reford's convalescence was not restful for others. Her plans called for trees to be removed, stone walls and endless

meandering pathways to be built, and boulders to be hauled into place. And that's not counting all of the flowers and shrubs that needed to be planted, including figuring out how to propagate rare species.

Today, visitors can only marvel at the depth of her passion.

A tour starts with a low-key entrance garden just beyond the visitors' centre. The flowers are pretty but ordinary – cosmos, daisies, sedum and cornflower. Turn a corner, however, and you are swallowed by woodland.

We were tentative at first, consulting the map, wondering if we were on the right trail. But in no time we just surrendered to our surroundings, following the pathway in front of us, stopping to admire whatever flowers filled the space.

Low rock walls frame many of the paths, fronting the flowerbeds. Some have helpful markers – saxifrage, yellow wax bells, wild ginger. Some beds are carefully manicured, but most are informal and seemingly at one

Le Bois de Biais et sa Folie. A treehouse is set into a grove of poplars and willows at the International Garden Festival.

with nature. There are seating areas here and there, inviting visitors to take a quiet moment to sink into the surroundings.

At one turn in the trail, an impressive rock garden tumbles down a high bank above a stream called Page's Brook. Another trail leads to a vegetable patch surrounded by a pretty picket fence. Kale, poireau leeks, basil and other edible plants are set off by colourful late-summer bloomers like hydrangea and calendula.

We pause to study the trail map and regret the timing of our late-August visit. One of Elsie Reford's crowning achievements was her ability to cultivate rare Himalayan blue poppies, which bloom from mid-June to mid-July. The azaleas and lupins would also be in bloom then. There's also the primula glade to consider and the crab-apple

garden, and so much more.

We also regret that we have not allowed enough time for our visit. We have to miss Estevan Lodge, which features historical displays and photos by Elsie's husband, Robert Wilson Reford. We also have to miss the property's exploration of green technology at Eco House.

However, we do take time to track down the herd of sheep – "lambmowers" – that have replaced the gas lawn mowers in the green space close to the visitors' centre.

On our drive back to our hotel, we plot a return visit – in late spring. 📍

#### IF YOU GO

- Reford Gardens/Les Jardins de Métis and the adjacent International Garden Festival are on Route 132 in Grand-Métis, Que., about a 3½-hour drive east of Quebec City. The historic Reford Gardens, bordered by the St. Lawrence River to the north and the Mitis River on the west, were developed over three decades by a gardener extraordinaire, Elsie Reford. Today's property boasts more than 3,000 species, cultivars and varieties, from everyday plants to the exotic.

Garden buffs get to double their pleasure by following a woodland trail to the adjacent property that has hosted the acclaimed International Garden Festival since 2000.

- The festival, set out on two perpendicular axes, showcases innovative installations conceived by designers from various disciplines, including landscapers, artists and architects.

*Reford Gardens open daily from June 3 to Oct. 8. The adjacent International Garden Festival opens June 23 and runs to October.*

**For information on both the historic garden and the garden festival:**  
www.refordgardens.com

**When is the best time to visit the Reford Gardens?** That may depend on your favourite plants. Under the website's "Gardens" tab, you'll find a link that lists what's in bloom when.



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