

MARTIN BOND



A SERIES OF MINIATURE CHAPELS AT THE JARDINS DE MÉTIS PAYS HOMAGE TO QUEBEC'S FORGOTTEN HEIRLOOM VEGETABLES.

TEXT ODILE HÉNAULT

The Jardins de Métis, situated on the southern shore of the St. Lawrence River as it widens towards the Atlantic Ocean, testify to the love and care of Elsie Reford's transformation of a dense coniferous woodland into a cultivated showcase in the early 20th century. The Gardens are now headed by Elsie's great-grandson Alexander Reford, who in 2000 introduced a competition for artistic installations that has since evolved into one of the world's major contemporary garden festivals.

The festival's 14th edition attracted 290 proposals from 31 countries. Among the six projects selected, one stands out, reaching back through time to Elsie. *Sacré potager* (holy kitchen garden) was designed by atelier barda, a Transatlantic team comprised of three young architects (Antonio Di Bacco, Cécile Combelle, Patrick Morand) and a graphic artist (Julien Pinard) from Montreal and Paris. Their proposal, a humble yet poignant homage to "forgotten" vegetables, is, in their words, "a pretext to initiate a common understanding that [...] promotes biodiversity."

As they searched for a poetic way to raise awareness of the disappearance of heritage food crops, members of atelier barda were inspired by tiny shrines disseminated throughout the Quebec and French countryside. They built 18 small chapel-like structures, each displaying votive candles normally found in churches, where they are lit to obtain favours from higher powers. Lyne Bellemare from Seeds of Diversity, an organization dedicated to traditional knowledge related to garden plants, selected



ABOVE LEFT A MINIATURE CHAPEL AND PLANTINGS COMMEMORATE THE DR CAROLYN WHITE TOMATO, A SPECIES ONCE PLANTED ON QUEBEC FARMS. ABOVE RIGHT THE VOTIVE CANDLE DRAWINGS FOR NINE OF THE 18 PLANTS IN ATELIER BARDA'S INSTALLATION.

18 now-rare species once cultivated by Quebec farmers.

The tiny plywood chapels, some tall and slim, others more closely connected to the ground, are each dedicated to a single species. Corresponding live plants are sown alongside. An illustration of each species adorns some of the candles while others feature a descriptive text. The project takes on its full commemorative power at night when the lit candles shine through the grove.

One cannot help but think back to plant-hunting pioneers such as Frank Kingdon-Ward, who a century ago embarked on countless expeditions to the Far East—often putting his life at risk—in order to bring back specimens that would astonish gardeners in the Western world. Or Elsie Reford, a pioneer in her own right, who obtained Himalayan blue poppy seeds—long the signature plant of the Jardins de Métis—from Kingdon-Ward. One wonders how, after dedicating their life to diversity, these two would have reacted to the eradication of so many species by modern single-minded agribusiness demands for low-cost efficient production. They would probably have applauded atelier barda's efforts, an homage to unusually shaped and coloured heirloom vegetables that are exquisite to both the eyes and to the tastebuds. A *sacré* good job! **CA**

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