

# Municipal World

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## The Garden Experience

*Could it be a  
tourism draw for  
your municipality?*

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*Reford Gardens' wild and wacky  
contemporary garden festival is  
internationally renowned.*

*Photo: Martin Bond.*

# editor's corner



**Susan M. Gardner**

I have fond memories of a visit to the Montreal Botanical Garden with my children when they were younger. I remember how they wandered through the winding paths of the Chinese Garden there, looking with wonder at plants and architecture they'd never seen before. We were only in the city for a weekend, but a stop at the famed gardens was high on the list of things to do.

Designated a National Historic Site of Canada in 2008, the garden was founded in 1931. Today, it features 22,000 plant species and cultivars, 20 thematic and cultural gardens, 10 exhibition greenhouses, all spread over more than 75 hectares. And, it's a year-round attraction for the city as well. (In December for example, visitors are invited to "Celebrate the magic of Christmas in the Main Exhibition Greenhouse, lushly decked out for the season ... glowing with seasonal blooms to get you in the holiday spirit with Christmas at the Garden.")

For cities like Montreal that are home to showcase gardens, the impact of such attractions is significant. They not only provide an area of quiet, green respite for citizens, but are increasingly important destinations for tourists as well (the Montreal Botanical Garden, for example, attracts over one million visitors each year).

As pointed out by Michel Gauthier and Carol Cowan in their article on page 5, the continued growth of garden tourism presents a wonderful marketing opportunity for many Canadian communities – and not just the larger ones.

The trend is not limited to North America, either. Recent research by VisitBritain (Britain's national tourism agency) found that going to a park or garden is one of the most popular activities for overseas guests, "accounting for 36 percent of all visitors, placing only behind eating out, going to pubs, and shopping ... It means visitors are surprisingly more likely to spend time in a park or garden than to go to a museum, castle, historic house or art gallery."

The study also pointed to growing and prominent interest from "BRIC" markets, with Brazilians (61%), Russians (51%) and Chinese (45%) having some of the highest propensity to visit gardens.

So, how do you tap into this potential opportunity? Garden tourism researcher and professor of geography Dr. Richard Benfield, in a recent presentation to the Smithsonian, stresses that this segment seeks vacation destinations that offer novelty, intellectual stimulation, cultural distinctiveness, and opportunities to learn. His research shows that "those who visited garden theme attractions while traveling were more likely than average to use the Internet to plan (79.3%) and book travel (60.6%) in the past two years. They are avid consumers of travel-related media; however, they can also be targeted effectively through media that focuses on homes and gardens and natural science, as well as radio stations that offer classical, multicultural, or jazz music."

For the right "garden experience," it seems the world really may beat a path to your door. They just need to know it's there.

# THE GARDEN EXPERIENCE

## Could it be a tourism draw in your municipality?

According to the 2013 book *Garden Tourism* by Dr. Richard Benfield, the world's leading authority on the subject, "More people visit gardens in America than go to Disneyland and Disney World combined, and more than visit Las Vegas annually, making garden tourism one of the largest sectors in the tourism market."

Canada has its own share of this significant market. The most recent Travel Activity and Motivation Study (TAMS) Report (commissioned by federal and provincial tourism ministries) states that, in any given two-year period, a whopping 27 million adult Canadians and Americans visit the spectacular gardens of Canada while on an out-of-town trip of one or more nights.

The TAMS report adds that the greater proportion of garden visitors are 45+ years of age; they skew slightly more female than male, but not overwhelmingly so; they are more likely than the general population to be married, well educated, and have university degrees; while in any particular destination, they are likely to enjoy other cultural offerings and fine dining; and they have above-average household incomes.

Don't they sound like the ideal visitors you'd like to attract to your municipality?

In his book, Dr. Benfield tells us that garden tourism will see major growth in Canada until 2025, as baby boomers leave their gardens and travel for garden experiences.



Visitors are in awe of the spectacular dahlia border at Butchart Gardens.

### What It Means for Your Municipality

Destinations that recognize the gardens in their midst (for many) have a terrific and new opportunity to market to the above-mentioned demographic and capture the wave. Consider the following case-in-point examples.

**Butchart Gardens** – Rarely does a visitor to Victoria and/or Vancouver Island miss an opportunity to visit the famed Butchart Gardens – to the tune of over 1,000,000 visitors a year! Admittedly, Butchart Gardens markets their product aggressively – but so, too, do the City of Victoria and the Vancouver Island Tourism Association, both having long-recognized that doing so is a win-win for everyone.

**Canadian Tulip Festival** – Each spring visitors flock to attend the Canadian Tulip Festival – Ottawa's magnificent showcase of countless thousands of



**MICHEL A. GAUTHIER** has a venerable background in garden-related festivals and events, including Ottawa's Winterlude and Rideau Canal Festivals, the Canadian Tulip Festival, and the World Tulip Summit. As Executive Director of the Canadian Garden Council, Michel manages Canada's Garden Route, Garden Days, and the Canadian Garden Tourism Conference and Awards program. He can be reached at <michelgo@magma.ca>.

**CAROL COWAN** entered the horticultural world when her company, Zebra Promotions Inc., was named Canadian agency for the Dutch Flowerbulb Industry. Today, as Director of Operations & Marketing for the Canadian Garden Council, she is responsible for strategic planning, development, and implementation of files managed by the council. Carol can be reached at <zebra@passport.ca>.



Having fun at the Toronto Botanical Garden's Summer Daycamp for kids. Photo credit: Janet Davis.

tulips. Embraced by the city, Ottawa's tourism and hotel associations, and marketed to tour companies throughout Canada, the north-eastern U.S. and overseas, the festival has become a symbol of Ottawa and Canada's premiere spring tourism draw.

**Reford Gardens** – On a completely different scale is the little municipality of Grand-Métis on the Gaspé Peninsula, with a population of 256, and home to Reford Gardens/Les jardins de Métis – which, aside from being a garden that should be on everyone's "bucket list," holds an annual contemporary garden festival of international repute. With over 250,000 people a year visiting Reford Gardens, it has put Grand-Métis on the map, while at the same time making significant contributions to the revenue stream of

the village when they're there. Google Grand-Métis; on the first page of the site, under <infogaspesie.com>, it says, "Grand-Métis is a small and peaceful village renowned for its Reford Gardens." That's an overwhelming recognition of the contribution the gardens make to the entire municipality.

### We've Come a Long Way

The past decade has witnessed an enormous amount of activity and groundbreaking initiatives in Canada's garden experience marketplace, as highlighted by the following initiatives.

#### Canada's Garden Route

The first "penny to drop" was the realization that finding gardens in Canada was an arduous process. Unless one knew

the name of the garden, they were virtually impossible to find, as municipalities rarely listed these assets on their websites. So, the first initiative, thanks to sponsorship by VIA Rail Canada and Landscape Ontario Horticultural Trades Association, was the creation of the <www.canadagardenroute.ca> website, which has made finding Canada's gardens, garden-focused communities, and garden experiences of all types as easy as the click of a button.

This easy-to-navigate website has elevated the profile of Canada's gardens putting them in the same league as those of other countries, like the U.K. and U.S., which recognize the importance of their gardens as tourism generators and significant elements of their destinations' experiences.

### Garden Tourism Conference

Since 2009, thanks to the Ontario Government and Landscape Ontario, a biennial Garden Tourism Conference has been bringing together the garden and tourism (including municipalities and destination marketing organizations) sectors from Canada, the U.S., and around the globe to share their experiences of promoting gardens as part of their destinations. (As this is the only conference of its type in North America, in 2013 it was officially renamed the North American Garden Tourism Conference.)

Historically, this conference is held in Toronto in March, in conjunction with Canada Blooms, the country's largest flower and garden festival. (Check for updates at <http://gardentourism.blogspot.ca>.)

### Garden Tourism Awards Program

In 2011, the first Garden Tourism Awards were bestowed at the conclusion of the Garden Tourism Conference. This founded-in-Canada awards program recognizes best practices and excellence in three categories: Canadian Garden Tourism Awards, International Garden Tourism Awards, and Top 10 North American Gardens Worth Travelling For.

Now presented annually, these awards recognize those that make a difference and demonstrate garden tourism success. This is the only garden industry awards program in the world. (Montréal, recipient of the 2013 "Canadian Garden Destination of the Year" Award will be hosting



Astounding displays of tulips draw visitors from far and wide to the Canadian Tulip Festival – Ottawa and Canada’s premiere spring tourism draw. *Photo credit: Ottawa Tourism.*

the 2014 Garden Tourism Awards on May 22.)

### Canada’s Garden Days

2013 witnessed the first National Garden Day <[www.canadagardenday.ca](http://www.canadagardenday.ca)>, henceforth to be in June on the Friday before Father’s Day. (In 2014, the program will expand to include the full three days of Father’s Day weekend – Friday, Saturday, and Sunday, June 13 to 15.)

With activities at gardens and garden centres across the country, geared to gardening enthusiasts, families, schools, and tourists alike, Canada’s Garden Days are an opportunity to bring awareness to the importance of public and private gardens, the values of home gardening, the benefits related to gardens, and the promotion of their contributions to environmental stewardship.

Canada’s Garden Days have struck such a chord with the country’s garden experience and horticultural communities that there is a private members bill about to be tabled in federal parliament to make the Friday before Father’s Day officially known as our National Garden Day.

### Canadian Garden Council

Managing all these projects is the Canadian Garden Council. Founded in 2011, it is a not-for-profit corporation and the national umbrella body for provincial and national garden organizations. The council’s mission statement is “to be a platform where provincial,

territorial, and national garden organizations come together for one common goal of promoting the role and benefits of gardens in our communities.” Via its members, municipal, regional, and provincial garden tourism strategies and action plans are being developed, and garden tourism readiness workshops are being offered.

Membership in the council includes: the Ontario, B.C., and Maritime Garden Tourism Coalitions, the Québec Garden Association, Going Gardens U.K. (which markets the Canadian garden experience in Europe), Communities in Bloom, and the Canadian Nursery Landscape Association.

### Showcase Your Local Assets

Canada is fortunate to be a country rich in the quality and variety of its gardens, garden experiences, and garden-focused communities.

As a municipality, it would make sound economic sense to ensure that, if you’ve got public gardens in your region, they’re highlighted on your website. If you are an award-winning Communities in Bloom destination, let the world know via your website that you take pride in not only what you have to offer, but what you look like. Use the garden assets in your community as a new way to attract visitors – whether they come from the adjacent municipality or from around the world. *MW*

## CULTURAL PLANNING HOW-TO

### Rediscovering the Wealth of Places:

*a municipal cultural planning handbook for Canadian communities*

Greg Baeker’s book provides a practical introduction to core planning concepts and tools, including a methodology for cultural mapping and the systematic identification of a wide range of local cultural assets. A strong focus is placed on the effective integration of culture in planning across municipal departments, with a look at some leading practices from Canada and around the world.

### Cultural Planning for Creative Communities

A practical “how to” book on Municipal Cultural Planning and the Creative City concepts for municipalities of all sizes. Authored by Gord Hume, one of the leading pioneers of the Creative City movement in Canadian municipal government, this book offers practical ideas and plans on how Canadian municipalities can adapt the emerging “fourth pillar of sustainability” into their planning, budgeting, decision making, and community leadership.

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