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## FALL *in the* CITY

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in **ST. JOHN'S**

**PLUS**

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a tiny car and a wee  
Scottish isle

**+10** best  
ghost towns

DISPLAY UNTIL NOVEMBER 10, 2009



HORTICULTURE

# A garden in the wilderness

**STEP INTO** the Entrance Garden at the Reford Gardens, on the south shore of the St. Lawrence River east of Rimouski, Que., and you enter a storybook. The shady forest of 100-year-old conifers is painted with a fall palette of crimson shrubs, yellow birch leaves and ivory hydrangeas. Winding paths lead to daisy chains of flower beds and wooden bridges pass over a sinuous brook.

This 20-hectare, English-inspired collection of 18 gardens at the confluence of the St. Lawrence and Mitis rivers is home to 3,000 native and exotic plants and draws more than 100,000 visitors in a busy year. And it was created by the vision of one woman, Elsie Reford, who, according to her great-grandson, garden director Alexander Reford, “carved a garden out of the Quebec wilderness.”

Take a seat on a handy log, wild flowers poking through its burls, and imagine, if you will, the year 1926. Convalescing after

The colours at Reford Gardens (RIGHT) give painters pause to reflect. The gardens’ rare Himalayan blue poppies (БОТТОМ) are the progeny of plants grown from seeds brought to Canada in the 1930s.



surgery, Elsie rested here at Estevan Lodge, the fishing camp she inherited from her uncle, Canadian Pacific Railway president Sir George Stephen. Years later, her family would joke, “she did not know the difference between a dandelion and a daisy.” Still, Elsie was strong and determined — she could land 15-kilogram salmon and had twice ridden by horseback 500 kilometres from the fishing camp to Gaspé, Que. — and at age 54 began an ambitious 30-year, garden-making project.

The area’s microclimate, nourished by moist air and lingering snows, proved to be a boon. Thin topsoil with clay beneath did not. Elsie’s team built walls, moved rocks and larded the acreage with “rich peaty soil and good sands.” Bartering salmon for leaves from neighbours’ groves, she lowered peat content with her own compost. Each experiment, each blissful triumph, she recorded in the diaries

that are now on view in the remodelled 1887 lodge.

Today, blue gentians, violet anemones and red Japanese maples flourish, a near miracle just south of the 49th parallel. Roses and lilies border the 90-metre Long Walk, Elsie’s sole concession to formality, and songbirds and blue herons frequent the Pond and Woodland gardens. Just beyond, a bridge leads to garden-inspired art such as Suresh Perera’s forest.SQUARE.sky — a large suspended square reflected in a circular pond — which is part of this year’s International Garden Festival, a Reford event since 2000.

From the veranda of the lodge, there are splendid views of the Mitis River. A flag snaps in the wind. Sunset, Elsie’s most cherished time of day, promises to be glorious.

For more information, go to [www.refordgardens.com](http://www.refordgardens.com)

— Nancy Wigston

