

PUTTING ON A GOOD SHOW

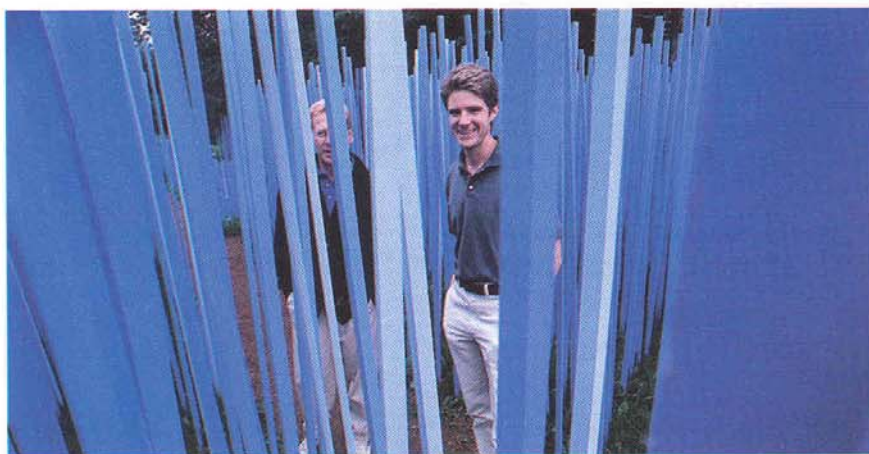
In the wilds of French-speaking Canada, TIM RICHARDSON discovers a brand new contemporary garden festival which has excited extremes of opinion—favourable and otherwise—from visitors.

EVER since the Chaumont contemporary gardens festival in the Loire Valley became internationally renowned (it was featured in *COUNTRY LIFE*, July 29, 1999), an unofficial race has been on to see which country can initiate its own version. This year sees contemporary garden shows in Switzerland (Lausanne), Sweden (Gothenburg) and Germany (Manningen), but the new festival at the Jardins de Métis at Grand-Métis, two hours' flight north of Montreal, is probably the most ambitious.

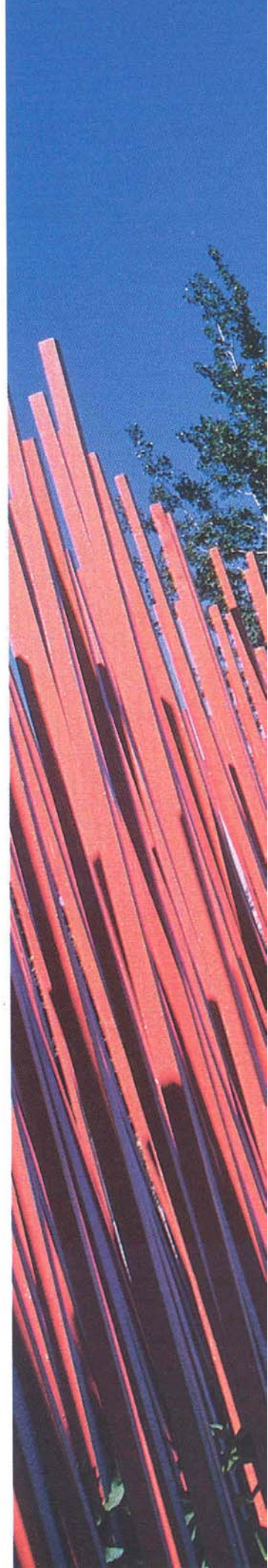
Eight garden designers, including Britain's Jill Billington, were invited to create small show gardens that will remain open to the public until October 9. There was no specific brief; the designers were asked

only to respond to the natural environment, overlooking the massive, tidal St Lawrence River, and the historic woodland gardens created in the wild, romantic style of William Robinson by Elsie Reford from 1926 to 1959.

It was Alexander Reford, a great-grandson of Elsie Reford and now director of the gardens, who had the idea for the festival, and the intention is that it will grow larger and remain an annual event. The Jardins de Métis, which can be reached via an internal flight from Montreal to Mont-Joli, are a much-visited attraction on the Gaspé peninsula, and the international garden festival has excited extremes of opinion—favourable and otherwise—from visitors. >



(Above) Denis Lemieux (left), the festival director, and Alexander Reford, co-founder, in the Blue Sticks garden at the Jardins de Métis gardens festival. M Lemieux and Mr Reford are adamant that there should be no outright winning garden declared, as at Chelsea and other traditional garden shows, and that there should be no theme imposed, as there is at Chaumont. In this way, they hope that the festival will be a celebration of the historic gardens, rather than a competition. (Right) The painted blue sticks turn to shocking red when the visitor turns round in Claude Cormier's outdoor installation, inspired by the Jekyllian long border in the historic gardens. Thus the garden contains the vital elements of invitation, progression, anticipation, surprise and variety—but no plants







(Above and above right) The Transfusion Garden by California-based Jennifer Luce is an uncompromising composition, well sited in its little clearing. It symbolises the decision of Elsie Reford, creator of the Jardin de Métis to give up salmon fishing and take up gardening. The pink gravel is intended to mimic the colour of salmon, and fishing flies adorn slate plaques engraved with elegant prose entries from her diary, documenting her gardening experiences

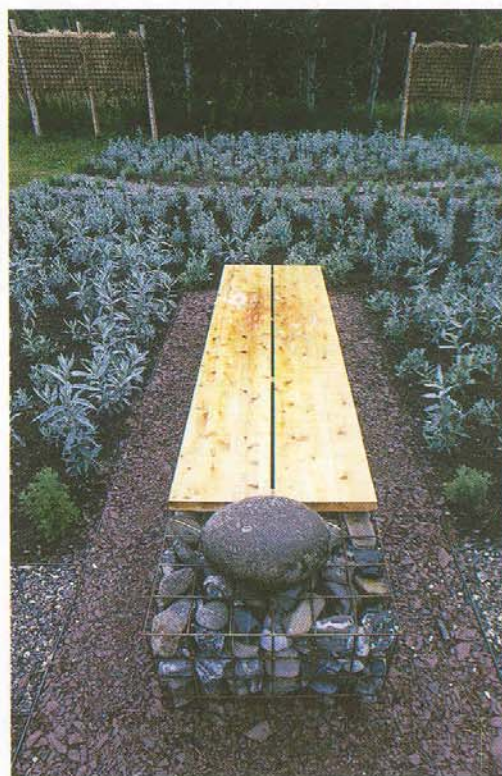


(Above) Living Room, complete with high, grassy walls, an inflatable sofa and a television set, is the first garden that visitors find. The designers say the garden 'caricatures our attempts to return to nature in our domestic gardens'. Whatever the philosophy, the garden is great fun and the children's favourite. The grass seed was simply sprayed onto the walls, a landscaping technique borrowed from the local hydroelectric industry. (Left) The grass is raked to give it a shaggy look. Muscum guides in Quebec all wear these sola topi hats



(Left) The entrance to Jill Billington's garden, Clearings, is a random labyrinth of bark-stripped eastern white cedar trunks, smooth to the touch. With plantings round the clearing beyond, this is the most horticultural of all the gardens

(Above) Not in my Backyard is the provocative title of this garden by two young Montreal designers. The basic idea is recycling: strips of crushed glass alternate with turf, and wire fencing, furled and unfurled, is used decoratively



(Above and left) The most complex garden is the Garden of Rest by Canadian group PLANT/BranchPLANT. Centred on a monumental stone bed, the planting consists of two types of artemisia that will grow to form soft hummocks. The use of straw enclosed in mesh is a good, original idea in a modern garden context

For more details, visit: www.refordgardens.com
Photographs: William Shaw.