

COLOUR IN THE CLEARINGS

ALL PHOTOGRAPHS: JILL BILLINGTON

Hidden deep in the woods in northern Quebec are a series of wildly inventive gardens — part of Canada's first ever international garden festival. Jill Billington, who designed one of the gardens there, reports on the event and the creative processes behind it



Summer 2000 marked the launch of the first truly contemporary garden festival in North America. The Reford gardens in Grand-Métis, northern Quebec, were established early this century on the eastern shore of the St. Lawrence River. Despite long, harsh, snow-covered winters and fast springs, they are remarkably lush, with plant variety that belies the latitude, almost at the 49th parallel. Massed matteuccias that grow wild along the coast, fields of lupins, woodland carpets of white *Cornus canadensis*, *Maianthemum canadense*, sanguinarias, hepaticas, trilliums and elegant little clintonias are a joy. But to these, Elsie Reford, the founder, added a collection of rare malus trees, paeonies, lilies, and herbaceous plants that include massed blue Himalayan poppies, *Meconopsis betonicifolia*, making this a distinguished and beautifully maintained garden that attracts many visitors to the site every summer.

To this 'jardin historique' has been added a bold new series of gardens in a different part of the forest. These are intended to establish renewal of the idea of 'the garden' by expressive experimentation. The inspiration for the project came from the influential Chaumont festival in France, but the character is quite different because the defined spaces within the forest are random in size and shape. In the late 19th century settlers made clearings in the forest following the line of the shore of the St. Lawrence River that offered access to fishing. Log cabins were built in these enclosures and some of the clearings are interconnecting, while others are almost secretive, so every 'garden' already had its own atmosphere.

In August 1999 eight invited designers visited the estate and had time to see some of the locality. They included architects, artists, and landscape designers. Some worked individually, others as partners or in groups. Sites were drawn from a hat and each designer had time to do a visual survey and explore their own personal response. Proposals

evolved over the following months and intentions were clarified by January for the gardens to be built in spring 2000 for the summer season.

The festival is a celebration of gardens that have evolved with imagination, curiosity, wit and humour. To enter 'Le jardin de bâtons bleus' by Claude Cormier is an entertaining experience. He has erected over 3,000 slim timber sticks, between 0.6 to 1.8m high and all with a square section. Three sides of each 'bâton' are painted the cerulean blue of the meconopsis and the third side, hidden from the entrance, is a complementary orange, the colour of the poppy's stamens. On entering this blue garden, the visitor turns round, extremely surprised to find that the garden is actually hot orange. Cormier likens the linear labyrinth to being down sized among the pixels of a digital image.

Nearby the modern garden truly becomes 'the outdoor room'. Bernard Saint-Denis and Peter Fianu show the garden as a living room, evolved into the ultimate cosy home with high walls of turf. It is 'tastefully' carpeted with a chequered pattern of alternate squares of clipped grass, some fertilised to deep green to contrast with the natural mid-green of the other squares. To complete the domestic bliss is a plastic sofa facing a fully functioning television.

Susan Herrington's long narrow site is the only one that really overlooks the St. Lawrence and is entitled 'Surf and turf'. Seven turf panels are set into 1.8m high metal frames that pivot to create a vertically louvred entrance, providing glimpses or full views of the river. Herrington used different



This spread, clockwise from top left: Claude Cormier's 'Jardin des bâtons bleus'; detail of insect pathways in the trunk of western red cedar in Jill Billington's 'Clearings'; 'Clearings' seen through the trees; the chequerboard carpet in 'The Living Room', made by fertilising alternate squares of turf; 'Transtusion' by Jennifer Luce





Top: pivoting turf louvres in Susan Herrington's 'Surf and turf'

Above: 'Not in my back yard' by Patricia Lussier and Anna Radice manipulates traditions in a totally unexpected manner

grasses, from dark green rye to blue fescues grown on fabric during the winter. In parallel lines of clay pots, those 'foreign' plants once brought by settlers from Europe, represent 'exotic' imports. Native plants are deliberately planted in association.

The wilderness makes a huge impression upon Europeans. I was greatly affected by the sense of such vast expanses of forest that faced the early settlers and how they managed the landscape by clearing domestic spaces. However in a land so relentlessly forested, people seem small and easily lost. So the garden I designed, 'Clearings', is a space entered through a maze of upright posts, as much as 2m high, concealing the enclosure but suggesting that there are ways in. Routes are not defined, some are so narrow that only small children squeeze between logs, excluding adults, but wider gaps offer entrance by trial and error. Once inside there is nothing but a quiet secluded space, with only peripheral encroaching native plants like fireweed, loosestrife, indigenous ferns and anemones. 'Weeds' have been planted with the care normally given to indulged hybrids. They indicate that nature is poised, ready to reclaim its own while above, the Canada bird whistles its unfinished tune.

'Le Jardin de repos' is in the largest space. Three designers, Lisa Rappoport, Mary Tremain and Christopher Pommer, textured the ground with waves of silvery artemisias, dissected by narrow routeways made of crushed sea shells. The site is widely open to the sky with one centrally placed flat 'chaise longue' built of timber over a gabion base. A line of four white stemmed aspens form a natural centre in their boundary line and on either side raised stilt fences of straw-filled wire panels follow the line. With characteristic humour, a semi-circular timber seat stands on another boundary with its back to the garden, looking into the forest. From here the visitor may observe without being observed.

Recycling is the theme for the 'Not in my back yard' garden devised by Patricia Lussier and Anna Radice. Their garden uses familiar themes, water, paths, lawn and containers, but manipulates traditions in a totally unexpected manner. The effect is to invite the visitor to pause and look at the rich detail. Parallels of long immaculately grassed humps reminded me of Neolithic long barrows. Recycled glass chippings provide sparkling routes and galvanised metal tubs are used to store water.

'Transfusion' pays homage to the gardens' founder, Elsie Reford, who transformed her former fishing lodge into a garden. The designer, Jennifer Luce focusses on the dramatic moment in Elsie's life when, on medical advice, she traded her passion for salmon to soil. So came about her extraordinary ambition to make the superbly lush historic garden



so far north. Jennifer has constructed an immaculately laid rectangular ground, with a base of dry salmon-coloured gravel 'beach' from which erect steel posts hold fixed slate 'pages' inscribed with passages from her notebooks. Fishing flies and hooks hang with them and fishing lines are suspended above, but glass blood transfusion equipment remind us of the medical impulse that founded the garden.

The only locally born artist, Marie-Chrystine Landry, created a garden of calls. She chose to put into her elongated strip of land in the forest an immaculate narrow stretch of lawn that rises like a jetty over a sea of cobalt blue gravel. The river that gave life to the area is her theme. Uncompromising rhythms of straight lines drawn by gardenesque plants, like dwarf conifers and rounds or artemisia, give a coded message of dots and dashes — morse code, the universal maritime call for assistance.

Because most of the designers could not be there at the beginning, interpreting the ideas greatly depended upon those who built the foundations of the gardens. The great strength of the show is that this

was carried out with great sensitivity, meticulous attention to detail, thoughtful translation and sheer hard working enthusiasm. All the designers valued the way this was managed before they came on site.

The festival was conceived by Alexander Reford, director of the Reford gardens, Denis Lemieux, festival director and Philippe Poullaouec-Gonidec, professor of landscape and environment at the University of Montreal. From the first they inspired and encouraged the designers and the festival is a tribute to their vision and determination.

To see the festival, the visitor approaches from the house by following a stilt 'fence' of bright yellow canvas that winds beside the path through deep woodland to arrive at a large open display area. Beneath a yellow canopy are tables inscribed with quotes from the designers and yellow 'Adirondack' chairs to sit and absorb information about the garden installations. Yellow is the colour of friendship.

JILL BILLINGTON IS A GARDEN DESIGNER AND AUTHOR.

Above: Looking out into the forest from the 'Garden of rest' by Lisa Rappoport, Mary Tremain and Chris Pommer

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