



“Pictures for Long Remembrance” – The gardens Elsie laboured over for more than 30 years have become a national historic site.



Elsie Reford's Secret Garden

*Little known outside Quebec,
Les Jardins de Métis
grew from one woman's work
and vision*

By **GEORGE GALT**
From *IMPERIAL OIL REVIEW*



YOU DON'T have to daydream to imagine how this place sounded, how it smelled, how the sunlight fell on the leaves more than half a century ago. Today, the same path winds along the bubbling brook, and the blush roses, the royal blue larkspur and the purple-tufted thyme all grow as they once grew.

Wander down below the high bank beside the stream, into the secluded rockery where these gardens began, or stand among the lush rhododendrons

PHOTOS: © LES JARDINS DE MÉTIS;
(INSET) WILLIAM NOTMAN & SON/MCCORD MUSEUM

and blue poppies in the neighbouring hollow, and you can almost see Elsie Reford there, at work in a wide-brimmed straw hat and ankle-length cotton skirt, her stout gardening shoes streaked with dirt.

Sitting in one of the floral bowers she wrought out of this tough terrain on Quebec's lower St. Lawrence River, she once wrote: "Looking up through the exquisite blossoms, in fact everywhere, the pictures are for long remembrance."

It's doubtful that Elsie Reford ever foresaw that millions of visitors would one day walk her winding woodland paths and gaze on her carefully chosen plants.

By the end of World War II, her 16-hectare garden and adjoining farmland was still a vast private preserve little known outside her personal circle.

The original property, at the mouth of the salmon-rich Métis River, nearly equidistant from Matane and Rimouski, was first bought by George Stephen, president of the Canadian Pacific Railway, in 1886. He later built a fishing lodge on the land, giving it the name of Estevan, a confection made up of key letters in his surname and that of his business partner, William Van Horne.

Elsie had the good fortune to be

Stephen's favourite niece, and when he returned to England in 1890, he gave her free use of Estevan. In 1918, when she was 46 and married to Robert Wilson Reford, the son of a shipping tycoon and himself involved in shipping, Elsie assumed legal ownership of Estevan.

Some years later she started a vegetable garden there and, a few years after that, began to fashion what would become one of the great ornamental gardens of Canada—today known as Les Jardins de Métis.

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By most accounts Elsie Reford was a woman with a strict code of conduct, the epitome of old English Montreal's haute bourgeoisie. Out here in the Quebec hinterlands, surrounded by

farms and a few fishing families, hundreds of kilometres from Montreal society, she and her husband and their guests were known to "dress" every night for dinner.

According to Evelyn Annett, whose father was the butler at Estevan: "Mrs. Reford had a way with her that wouldn't let you be too friendly. But she was an extraordinary person, very interested in politics and business when not many women were. And, of course, she lived for her gardens."



Fall Slendour – The Autumn crocuses bloom in mid-October.

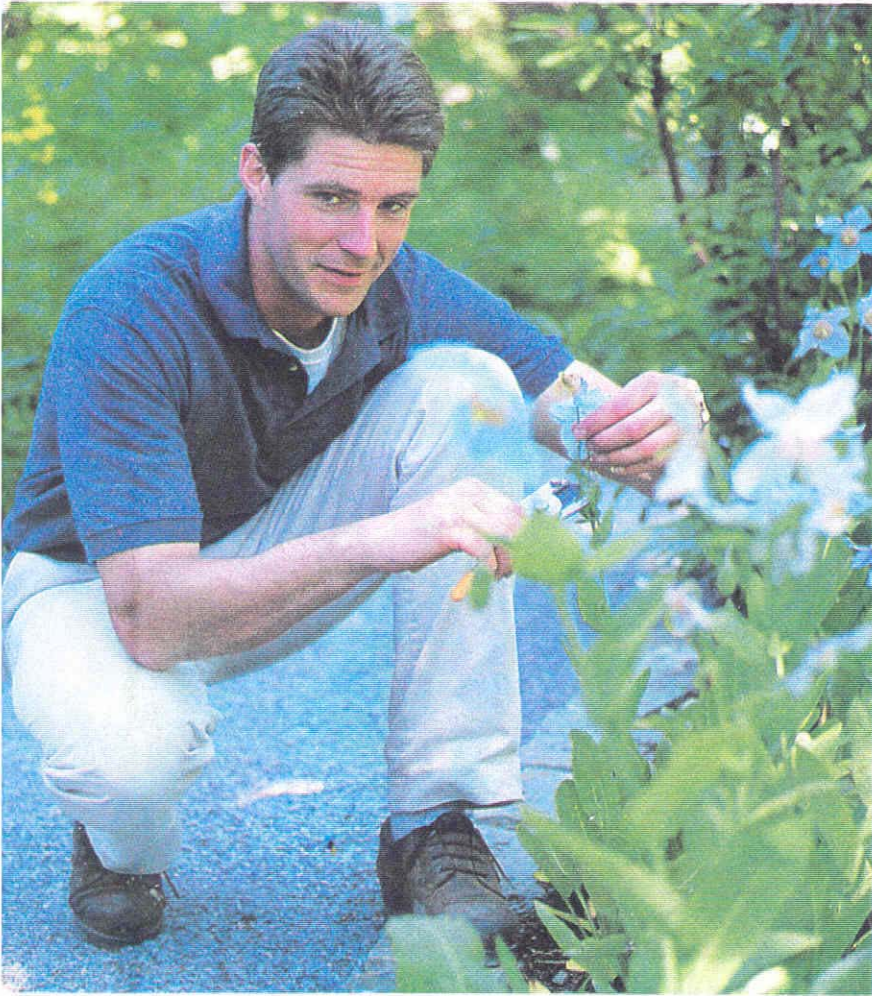
The gardens show a gentler side to Elsie's apparent imperious personality, and yet they also speak of her strength. The soil was as dismally bad as the other physical properties of Estevan were inspiring. "Probing everywhere," Elsie wrote in her diary, "revealed nothing but six inches of the poorest stuff."

SET BACK from the road and shrouded by a thick curtain of trees, the house and gardens were invisible to the passerby. Elsie enjoyed her privacy, and opened the gardens to the public only a few times during the 1940s

to raise money for the war effort.

For more than 30 years she worked on her gardens. "She went off every morning and would not come back until early afternoon," says her eldest grandson, 77-year-old Robert Reford. Then, in 1954, when she was 82 (she would live for another 13 years), she gave the Estevan estate to her son Bruce, a retired army officer. Unwilling to take on his mother's epic gardens and 37-room summer house, he put Estevan up for sale. The Quebec government acquired the gardens and opened them as a tourist attraction.

Les Jardins de Métis became a



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Elsie's Blue Poppies – Today great-grandson Alexander tends them.

popular stopping place for travellers visiting the Gaspé Peninsula just to the north. By the 1990s, more than 100,000 people a year were buying tickets, an impressive gate for this remote location about 300 kilometres northeast of Quebec City, but not enough for the site to turn a profit. In 1994, Les Jardins de Métis went back on the market.

An Oxford-trained historian, Alexander Reford was working as dean of men at St. Michael's College at the University of Toronto and was writing about his great-great-

grandfather Robert Reford—Elsie's father-in-law—for the *Dictionary of Canadian Biography* when he learned that bids for the property had been invited. Rumours were circulating of a proposed commercial development, so he canvassed family members to see if anyone else in his large clan would help save Elsie's creation.

Eventually Alexander, his brother Lewis and Lewis's wife, Susan McArthur, both investment bankers, formed a partnership with the local nonprofit group that had been running the gift shop, restaurant and museum in the old summer house.

The partnership won the bidding. By the summer of 1995, 32-year-old Alexander Reford had left his university job to become the first director of the now privatized Jardins de Métis. He had never before owned so much as an apartment flower box.

"I don't think Elsie knew a dandelion from a daisy when she first started here," he says. "She was an amateur, but a deeply knowledgeable one by the end of her gardening career. And she had a painter's eye."

Elsie corresponded with horticulturalists in North America and overseas, and planted many varieties of

plants that had never been grown in this part of the world before. The gardens have retained the colourful and unregimented abundance she gave them. More than 1,000 varieties thrive in beds, borders and on stream banks.

On either side of what Elsie called the Long Walk, which is the only formal section of the gardens, you'll find lilies—her passion—Pinocchio polyantha roses, Peace hybrid tea roses, peonies, bluebells and maiden pink. Among her botanical rarities is the gardens' emblematic flower, the blue poppy, *Meconopsis betonicifolia*, which flourishes in midsummer. Originally from Tibet, the blue poppy grows in greater abundance at Les Jardins than anywhere else in North America.

These understated Himalayan plants, which have grown so well here for decades yet have failed regularly in gardens just down the road, support the claim that Les Jardins is blessed with a unique microclimate. "There's no hard scientific evidence for it," Alexander acknowledges, but there is no gainsaying the extraordinary results, either.

Alexander, who lives in a cottage on the property, employs more than a dozen gardeners, all of them seasonal. For most of the year he also

has the services of a trained horticulturist, Patricia Gallant, a ten-year veteran of Les Jardins. She tends the greenhouse, where all the annuals and some perennials are started, and oversees planting and plant care. This year Les Jardins is reintroducing old varieties of plants that were grown when the garden was first established.

THOUGH declared a national historic site in 1995, Les Jardins de Métis is still not widely known in Canada. About 85 percent of all visitors come from inside the province. Most of the rest visit from the United States and Europe.

Still, says Dianne McLeod, a consulting horticulturist in Fredericton, who has travelled to gardens in Britain, the United States and Canada, "Les Jardins is among the best. There's a beautiful, peaceful setting and a lovely, woodsy ambience. And there are rare plants, all of them well placed. You can see someone has chosen well."

That someone was Elsie Reford. For most people, her open glades and leafy arbours are in a far-away place. But those who make the trip to Les Jardins are rarely disappointed.



Prior to one opening day, Chicago Cubs manager Jim Riggleman was asked if he saw any omens for the upcoming season. "I don't believe in superstitions," Riggleman responded. "It's bad luck."

—WGN-TV, Chicago