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GARDENS OF THE MIND

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A former SMC Dean of Students masterminds top garden design showcase on the St. Lawrence

BY CHARLES OBERDORF

WHAT THESE PAGES SHOW ARE NOT WHAT MOST PEOPLE would call gardens, but all of them were created by young garden designers in response to basic questions about the garden. Is it a place to look inward or outward? A place of stillness or movement? Part of nature world or an alternative to it? A stimulus for the eye, the ear, the body?

Each year for the last nine years, between eight and 15 small gardens like these have constituted the International Garden Festival at the Jardins de Métis (a.k.a. Reford Gardens) on the St. Lawrence River about 270 km northeast of Québec City. The person most responsible for the festival is an alumnus of St. Michael's—even, for eight years, a Dean of Students, Alexander Reford ST4.

Reford looked so young in 1987, when he became dean—he was working on his Masters in History—that some called him the “Teen of St. Michael’s.” Young or not, he remained dean for eight years, meanwhile working toward a doctorate and writing for the Dictionary of Canadian Biography (DCB).

He was actually researching a DCB entry about a distant ancestor when, in a family archive, he discovered a trove of material about his great-grandmother’s vast flower gardens in Métis, Québec, where his ancestors had once owned a salmon fishing camp with a 37-room “lodge” for themselves and their guests. Reford decided to go to Métis, to see the gardens himself and possibly write a book about them.

Reford Gardens is still very much what most people imagine a great garden to be. Elsie Reford created its 40 acres of flowerbeds and borders starting just after World War I. In 1952, when she was 82, she gave the property to her son Bruce, Alex’s grandfather, but he was unable to maintain the gardens. So, retaining a riverfront farm on the property, he put the lodge and gardens up for sale. The province bought them and opened them to the public as a tourist attraction.

Alex Reford had visited Métis two or three times, but as a child. (After his grandfather sold them, he says, they took on “a sort of ‘Paradise Lost’ quality” in the family.) Now, seeing them for the first time as an adult, he learned that they might be lost again. The province had been losing \$300,000 a year on them and was thinking of selling them, possibly to a developer.

Together with two family members and the nonprofit group that had been running the gardens’ restaurant, museum and gift shop, Reford quickly formed a foundation and wrote a business plan to propose to the government. In just over a year, between August 1993 and September 1994, he turned what began as a vague academic interest

in his great-grandmother’s garden into a full-time position as its director. He quit St. Michael’s and in early 1995 moved to Métis.

Three years later, touring a garden festival in Chaumont-sur-Loire, in France, a light went on for him. At the time, Reford Gardens had a relationship with the University of Montreal’s summer school in landscape and garden design. Reford had seen how hard it was for students to get any of their work built, especially ideas that pushed the envelope. A festival like the one in France would give some of them, and other young designers, a chance to show their stuff.

It would also give Reford Gardens greater visibility and encourage people to come back. This last was important. About 85 percent of its visitors come from inside Québec; most of them summer in the region every year. Getting them to make repeat visits would be as remunerative as attracting new visitors—and easier.

Now in its tenth year, the International Garden Festival has so far showcased 75 gardens by approximately 200 designers from nine countries. By last December, 127 design teams had entered proposals for this year’s festival. Winners get six weeks to create their gardens and a budget of \$25,000—\$5,000 for the design and \$10,000

each for materials and labour. After one summer, or possibly two, each plot must be returned to its original condition. (Those constraints alone rule out the use of most garden staples, such as flowering shrubs or perennials.) As for visibility, some design teams have been asked to recreate their festival gardens at similar events in Canada, France, Italy and the U.K. In December, a book about the Festival was the lead item in a *New York Times* roundup review of the most interesting garden books of 2008.

Alex Reford says that his time at St. Michael’s gave him some preparation for his life today. As Dean of Students, he had some responsibility for the grounds around the residences, though he’s quick to admit that he was never a hands-on gardener like the College’s aptly named Fr. Gardner, not to mention those two other avid trowel-wielders, Fr. Scollard and Fr. McConica.

Where the College probably prepared him best, though, he thinks, was in its sharply contrasting seasons. “The gardens are the exact inverse of the campus,” he says. “St. Michael’s was very intensive from September to May, and then nothing. At Métis, it’s just the opposite. But in that way, the two environments are really very similar.”

Alex Reford is not allowed to have favourites among the festival gardens, but he agreed to identify several he felt were remarkable for different reasons. The comments about them are his.




Alexander Reford



Core Sample

North Design Office (Pete and Alissa North), Toronto, 2005, 2006 and 2007

Pete and Alissa are young practitioners of landscape architecture and teach landscape architecture at UofT. They created an elegant garden inspired by the core samples from mining and geology, evoking one of the motives that led to the exploration of eastern Quebec (by geologists William Dawson and William Logan). 100 tubes sampled the local environment, each one stuffed with a sampling of the landscape, stones, cones, leaves, seeds and so on. Interspersed with berms, the site came to life as visitors ambled through the vertical forest, intrigued by the contents and seduced by the effect of the sunlight traversing the tubes.



Sous-terrain de jeu

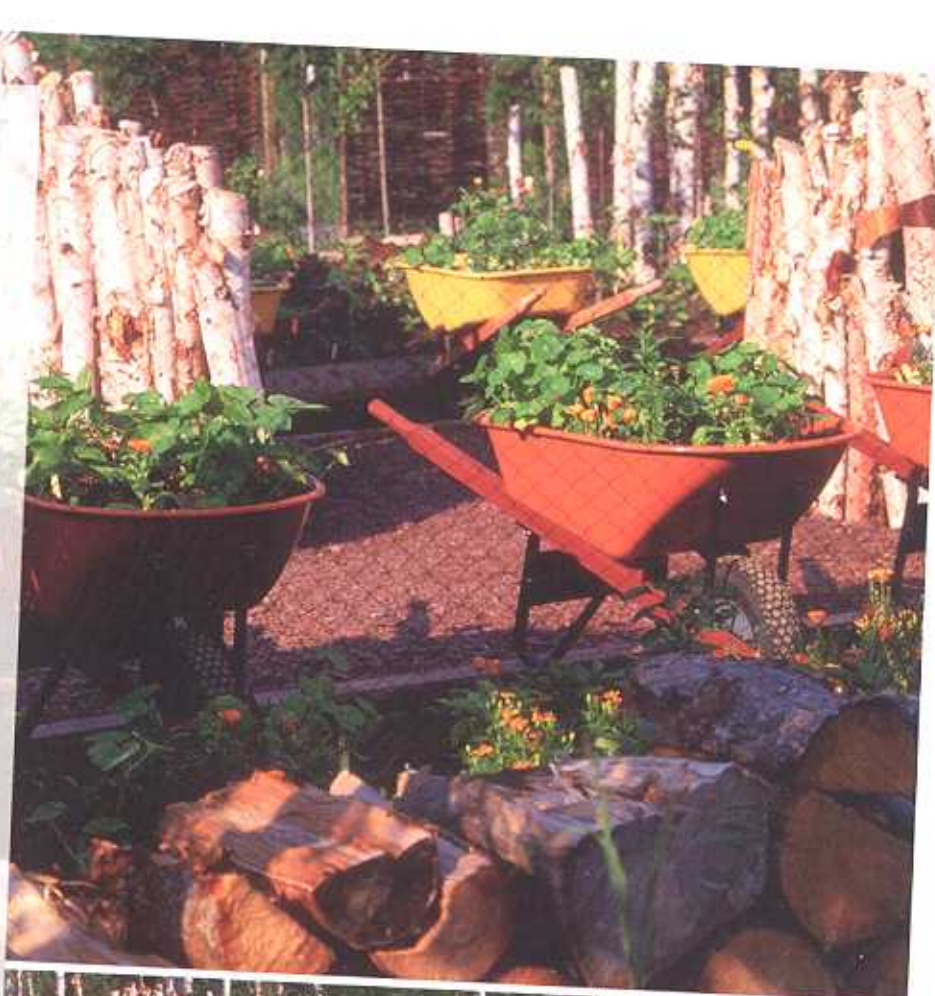
*Cédule 40, Chicoutimi,
Québec, 2005, 2006 and 2007*

This group of young visual artists from Chicoutimi created a space where the visitors themselves would plant the garden—not with a trowel and soil, but by interacting and using the over-sized swing. The movement of the visitors on the swing (and their enthusiastic enjoyment of same) sprinkled seed into the beds below, essentially planting the garden that came to life as the summer progressed. The contemporary garden is no longer a contemplative space, but an interactive environment, where the visitor is as much a part of the garden as the gardener.

Une semaine au potager

Michel Boulcourt, France, 2001

The vegetable garden is the most familiar garden form, and one with which even the least adventurous of gardeners has some familiarity. It is difficult to be innovative with vegetables—but this French designer showed how—creating a garden that was at once productive and aesthetic. Visitors toured a garden divided into seven spaces (one for each day of the week), each of which used painted wheelbarrows as the planting beds. Each barrow was planted with different edible plants (herbs and vegetables), carefully chosen to be of the same colour as the wheelbarrow, thereby creating seven chromatically organized spaces in perfect harmony. The garden was thus illustrative of the French tradition of ornamental gardens, where botany and agriculture are perfectly combined to create a beautiful (and flavourful) garden.

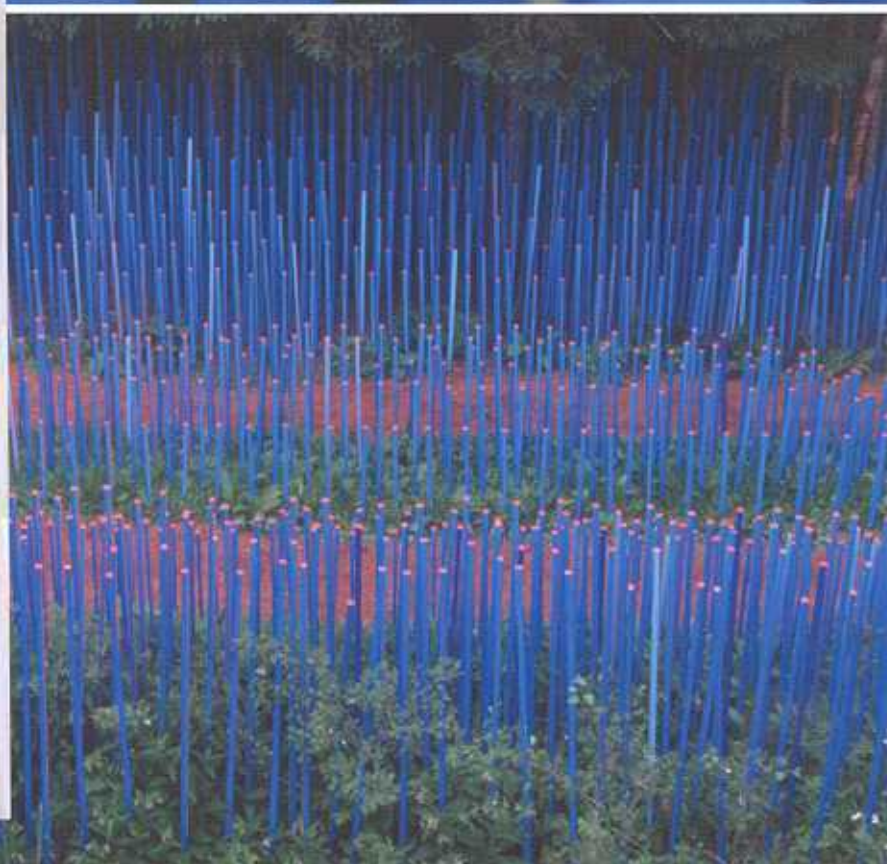
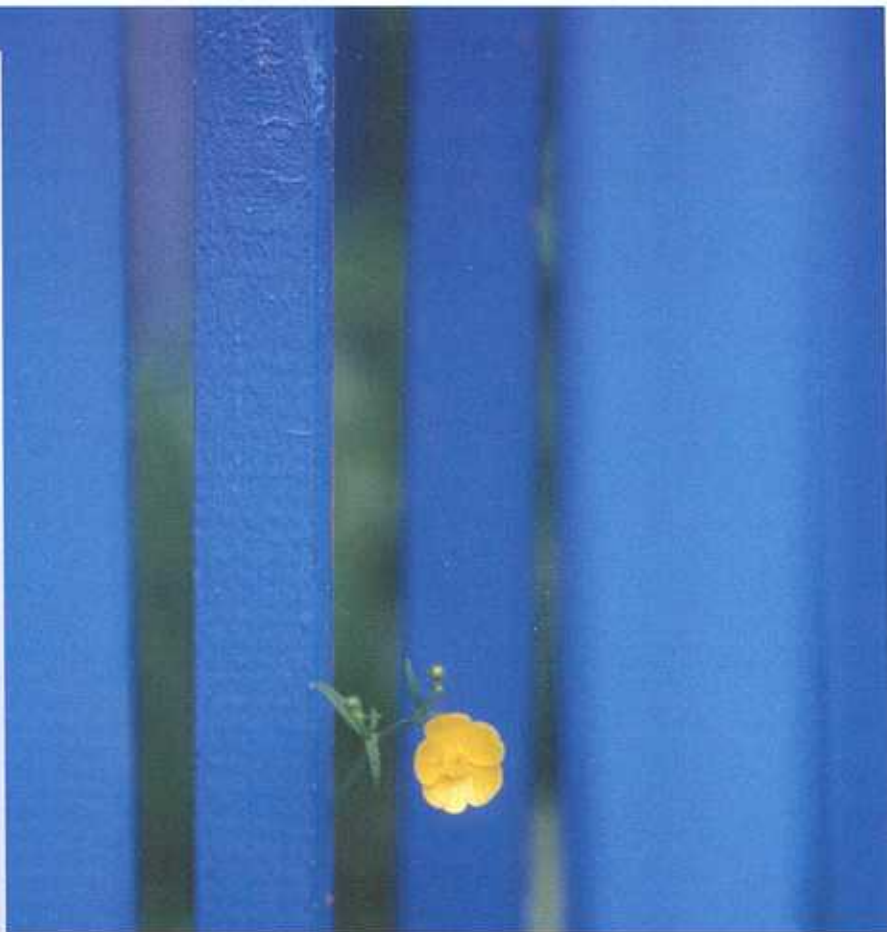


Blue Stick Garden

*Claude Cormier, Montréal, 2000
(it is coming back in 2009)*

This garden of 2700 blue and orange painted sticks has become one of the iconic symbols of contemporary garden design. It is anchored on the principles of garden design, and more specifically the English or mixed border, but uses sticks to provide height and colour. Replacing perennial plants with blue sticks, it is a very contemporary, some might say iconoclastic, gesture, particularly because the design was inspired by Gertrude Jekyll

(a popular figure from the Edwardian period of garden design) and my own great-grandmother, Elsie Reford, neither of whom would have "approved." Many visitors had the same reaction, but through colour and imagination the designer fomented debate, and the garden has grown in acceptability and popularity—even after its demolition. We later presented it at Canada Blooms, at a Luytens-Jekyll garden in the UK, Hestercombe, at a garden show in Montreal and are re-presenting it this summer as a centrepiece of our 10th anniversary celebrations.





Le Jardin des Hespérides

Cao Perrot Studios

(Andy Cao and Xavier Perrot)

USA and France, 2006, 2007

This garden was inspired by the quiet colours and forms of Vietnam, with a giant lantern at the centre of a quiet pond. The lantern was saffron coloured, like the robes of Buddhist monks, and provided remarkable reflections in the surrounding pool. Visitors traversed the pool and the lantern, balancing on the hidden steps and seemingly floating on the pond. Looking up, visitors could see the blue sky framed by the oculus of the lantern. The effects were multiple and the incorporation of such exotic materials and plants (orange trees) in the boreal forest was magical.