



# GARDEN CITIES EAST WEST

Jennie Butchart's soulmate found in  
the wilds of Quebec

→ BY SUZANNE MORPHET

**I**N 1926, FIVE YEARS AFTER Jennie Butchart famously transformed an abandoned limestone quarry on the Saanich Peninsula into an exquisite sunken garden, an equally energetic woman at the opposite end of the country was about to launch her own gardening project.

Elsie Reford inherited a fishing lodge and more than 500 acres of rugged wilderness on the south shore of the St. Lawrence River from a wealthy uncle, George Stephen, who made his fortune founding and financing the Canadian Pacific Railway. He had spent his summers there, indulging his passion for salmon fishing.

Elsie shared her uncle's love for the sport. But as she recovered from appendicitis one year, her doctor suggested that gardening would be a gentler pastime than wrestling feisty salmon.

Elsie was 54 when she began her project. It would take her a decade to convert about 20 acres of spruce forest into an enchanting garden bisected by a babbling brook and filled with native and exotic plants.

Today, more than 3,000 species, cultivars and varieties of





PHOTO BY ERIC MARCHAND

plants thrive here, including some of Elsie's originals, such as the diminutive Boyd Willow that she planted in the 1930s, surrounded by a carpet of saxifrage and double bloodroot.

As I strolled through Reford Gardens (also known as Jardins de Métis) in early fall, enjoying the autumn crocuses and last of the hydrangeas, I couldn't help but compare this garden with Butchart Gardens. Butchart is larger and more traditional, while Reford Gardens is smaller and more intimate. The latter also stages an international garden festival each year that explores garden design and experiments with the idea of garden as art.

But in many ways, the stories of the two gardens are strikingly similar, right down to *Meconopsis betonicifolia* (also known as *Meconopsis baileyi*), the rare Himalayan blue poppy that both Jennie and Elsie grew.

"A lot of people compare this garden to Butchart," agrees Patricia Gallant, a member of the gardening team at Reford Gardens. "What's different is the climate."

No kidding. This region—known as the Bas-Saint-Laurent—is almost 600 km northeast of Montreal. Winters are long, snowy and bitterly cold, with the temperature dipping to minus 30C. In spring, the stream at Reford Gardens becomes an icy torrent. Had Elsie not built stonewalls to contain it, her hard work and laboriously



The rare Himalayan blue poppy, seen here at Reford Gardens, is also grown at Butchart Gardens.

PHOTO BY LOUISE TANGUAY

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conditioned soil could have been washed away after one season.

While winter is harsh, summers are humid with cool nights, the ideal conditions — as Elsie discovered — for growing the blue poppy. Almost 400 poppy plants greet visitors in the Blue Poppy Glade, the progeny of the first plants Elsie grew from seeds, which she obtained in the 1930s from the Royal Botanical Gardens in Edinburgh (the same source used by Jennie Butchart).

“I would say it’s the largest blue poppy garden in Canada,” says Gallant, noting that it’s also the garden’s official flower and was one of Elsie’s favourites. (Interestingly, both Butchart and Reford gardens operate a restaurant that goes by the name Blue Poppy.)

Unlike Butchart Gardens, Reford Gardens left family hands when Elsie’s son sold it to the government of Quebec in 1961. But today it’s run by a not-for-profit group headed up by Elsie’s great grandson, Alexander Reford — another fascinating parallel to Butchart Gardens, which is now owned by Jennie’s great granddaughter Robin-Lee Clarke.

Along with the original gardens, Reford Gardens has an herb

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and picking garden and a greenhouse. Every year, chef Pierre-Olivier Ferry chooses about 20 new kinds of edible flowers and herbs to grow in the greenhouse, in addition to the 100 or so mainstays.

Last year, for instance, Ferry experimented with arugula, recording how the taste and texture changed every seven days, so he would know, for instance, “when we have to pick arugula to have a nutty taste without the spicy taste.”

As well as running the restaurant and two cafés on the property, Ferry and his team also produce between 1,000 and 1,500 jars of spreads, pickles and jellies each year, created with plants from the garden or from the wild.

Alexander Reford is delighted with his young chef’s creativity and passion. And focusing on food makes sense, since Elsie herself hosted countless dinner parties and events.

“The estate, like many others of the period, was self-sufficient in food production,” says Alexander, “with beef, lamb, cheese, milk, cream, vegetables and, of course, Atlantic salmon — so from a purely historical point of view, the increase in self-sustainability has a solid foundation.”

Sitting down to lunch in the Garden Café at the end of my



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↑ Tourists walk past flowers in bloom in the Sunken Garden at Butchart Gardens.

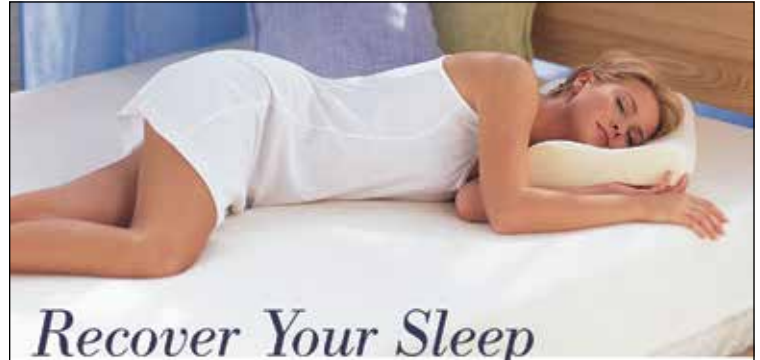
garden tour, I'm presented with a bowl of foaming sweet corn soup, followed by a plate of gravlax salmon garnished with pickled daisy buds, dill mustard and tiny clumps of sulpher-yellow flowers from the Bronze Fennel plant. A side salad of sliced fennel bulb is brightened with Lemon Lasil (one of 12 cultivars of basil Ferry has grown) and red and orange Nasturtium petals.

For those of us in Victoria, it takes a lot more effort to visit Reford Gardens than it does to drive up the road to Butchart Gardens, but it's one inspiring trip.

**IF YOU GO:**

Reford Gardens ([www.refordgardens.com](http://www.refordgardens.com)) is open from June to September. It's midway between Rimouski and Matane and a 10-minute drive from the regional airport in Mont-Joli. The airport has regular daily service from Montréal and Baie-Comeau via Air Canada (Air Canada Jazz).

Suzanne Morphet is a travel writer and photographer who lives in North Saanich, conveniently close to both the Victoria airport and the Swartz Bay ferry terminal. One of her favourite places in Canada is the Gaspé region of Quebec, where the Appalachian Mountains meet the St. Lawrence Seaway. **b**




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