



The beautiful landscapes of Les Quatre Vents are certainly worth viewing.

Last summer I journeyed to the rolling farmland of Charlevoix County, Quebec, to visit *Les Quatre Vents*, considered one of North America's finest gardens. Located high in the hills overlooking the mighty waters of the lower St. Lawrence River, it has been called one of Canada's best kept secrets. The garden is open for public viewing only a few days each summer, but fortunately we had obtained tickets many months beforehand. We joined a morning-long tour of the garden's 28 acres, and it wasn't long before its size, scope and beauty became clear.

The Making of Les Quatre Vents

During our tour, we learned about the gardener who created *Les Quatre Vents*, Francis Cabot. He was an American-born, Harvard-educated financier whose passion was horticulture. In 1965, the self-taught gardener and skilled botanist inherited *Les Quatre Vents* from his grandmother, who had been given the seigneurie in 1902. Until his death last year at age 86, he spent summers there with his family restoring and expanding the grounds by incorporating ideas from Japanese and English gardens, and even from the gardens at India's Taj Mahal.

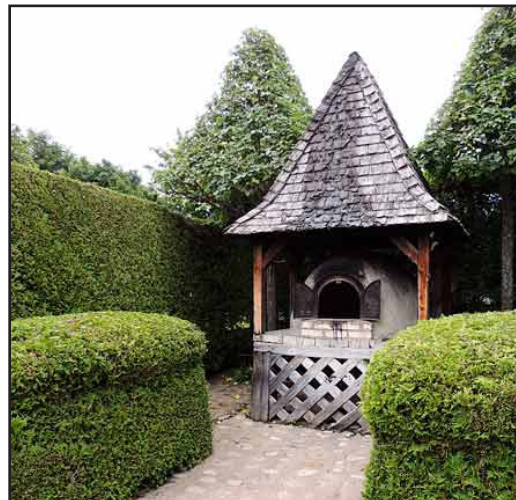
Cabot's goal was to create a garden that rivalled some of the most famous in the world. Those who knew him said he was a gentle, thoughtful and detail-oriented man who once, after a bad storm had taken its toll on the gardens, apologized to visitors that what they would see was less than perfection. During our tour, with each garden room neatly manicured and stunningly diverse, it was, well, just perfect.

Even though the region (Canadian zone 3; American zone 4) has a short growing season, Cabot was able to cultivate an astonishing variety of plant species. Many of them were native, but exotic species were featured as well. Despite its precise, organized layout, the garden was not built using an overall plan, it simply evolved. One of his first major undertakings was to use local limestone to build terraces and walls with planting pockets (a weed-free solution) to house alpine plants, one of his loves. Today, the walls and steps descending from his home to the larger gardens are covered with an assortment of his favorite mountain plants.



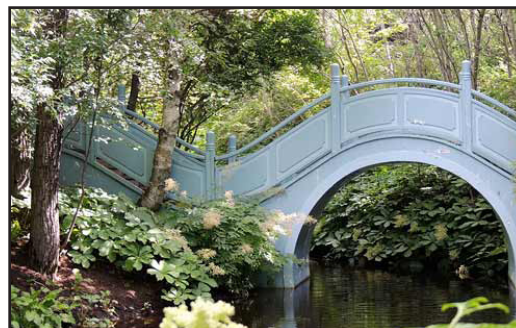
The limestone terraces surrounding the Cabot home are planted with an assortment of some of Cabot's favorite alpine plants.

There are 24 gardens in total, some small and some spectacularly large. Our tour started at three smaller walled gardens near the Cabot home. The bread garden had an oven used for bread baking and was framed by evergreen topiaries shaped like bread loaves. The kitchen garden featured salad greens and herbs planted in containers. Nearby was the guest garden, with cedar topiaries shaped like furniture.



The bread garden oven with loaf-shaped topiaries in front.

Moving on to the woodland garden, we saw five artificial streams and one of Cabot's favorite plants, primulas. He planted more than a hundred varieties to provide a continuous bloom cycle throughout the gardening season. Next was *Lac Libellule*, a small lake created by damming one of the streams that runs through the property. The landscape surrounding it was informal and naturalistic, with a simple red Japanese bridge that drew the eye. Further upstream was a pale-blue Chinese moon bridge, and in the woods stood a musician playing a violin solo for us. It looked like something out of an Impressionist painting.



The Chinese moon bridge in its naturalistic surroundings.

Another spectacular feature was the *pigeonnier*, a small building where pigeons nest. Cabot had it built based on photos and sketches published in 1926. In front was a long, narrow pool with cedar *allées* (walkways) on either side. Just as Cabot planned, we saw the full reflection of the *pigeonnier* in the pool's black waters.

With the help of a Japanese master carpenter, Cabot created an Asiatic garden, which took more than 10 years to finish. Here we saw two replicas of 15th century Japanese pavilions deep in a ravine; through it flowed a stream surrounded by mossy boulders. Two narrow rope bridges hung overhead.



The pigeonnier reflected in the pool.



The natural-rock swimming pool overlooks a wide open vista.

During the rest of the tour, we viewed spaces that opened to wide vistas and fields, with longhorn cattle grazing in the distance. The beautiful St. Lawrence River was visible from the in-ground, natural-rock swimming pool. Lovely surprises abounded, such as sculptures of forest animals, frogs and a giant mosquito.

For many of us who love to garden, Francis Cabot's legacy lives on, not just in his gardens (Stonecrop, his other home in Cold Spring, New York, is also open for public tours), but also through his many contributions to the horticultural world. He founded the nonprofit Garden Conservancy devoted to preserving exceptional private gardens in North America, such as the gardens of Alcatraz, tended by prison inmates and guards for more than a century, and the Longue Vue House and Gardens in New Orleans, damaged by Hurricane Katrina. He also founded the Aberglasney Restoration Trust to restore a 16th century garden in Carmarthenshire, Wales. He served as an advisor to the Royal Botanical Garden in Burlington, Ontario, and was chairman of the New York Botanical Garden in the 1970s. Cabot was one of the few non-Canadians to be



An allée at Les Quatre Vents

invested as an honorary member of the Order of Canada and was a *chevalier* in *l'Ordre national du Québec*.

It is the story of the making of *Les Quatre Vents*, however, that will undoubtedly best define him. Before his death, he put the Charlevoix Trust in place to preserve the garden until the final quarter of this century, with tour profits going to a local ecological centre. With its secrets revealed, I hope more garden enthusiasts will enjoy *Les Quatre Vents* in the years ahead. Tickets are available at the *Centre écologique de Port-au-Saumon* website (www.cepas.qc.ca).

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Bibliography

Francis H. Cabot, *The Greater Perfection: The Story of the Gardens at Les Quatre Vents*. New York: W.W. Norton & Company, Inc. 2001.