

OTHER

Blooms. An Illustrated History of the Ornamental Gardens at Ottawa's Central Experimental Farm

By Richard Hinchcliff. 2016. Sanderling Press. 304 pages, 35.00 CAD, Cloth.

Richard Hinchcliff's new book, *Blooms, An Illustrated History of the Ornamental Gardens at Ottawa's Central Experimental Farm* is, first and foremost, gorgeous. It is jam-packed with photographs, including contemporary images and archival material. The older photos include hand-coloured images, which have a lovely, painterly quality. Most of the recent photos come from Hinchcliff himself, who is clearly a technically-expert and artistically-talented photographer. Several accomplished botanical illustrators have worked at the Experimental Farm over the years, and their work graces the pages of the book as well.

The text itself can be divided into two sections: a history of the development of the gardens, and presentation of the current gardens.

The history starts with the founding of the gardens by William Saunders in 1886. Hinchcliff traces the development of ornamental plant research program, including the contributions of Saunders, his son Percy, James Fletcher, William Macoun, Isabella Preston, Felicitas Svejda, and many others. While they each had their favourite plants, collectively their focus never wavered from developing hardy, beautiful, and sometimes tasty, plants for Canadian gardens. In addition to introducing us to their work, Hinchcliff shows us a bit of the social lives of the researchers at the gardens. We learn about the musical Saunders family and Macoun's poetry. Isabella Preston, a highly regarded (and honoured) horticulturist both in Canada and abroad, was a prolific author of books and articles, but eschewed publicity and avoided speaking engagements whenever possible.

Hinchcliff also gives us a sense of the garden's role as an attraction for Ottawa residents and tourists alike. Popular as the gardens are today, they clearly played an even more vital role in Ottawa society in decades past. Getting people to and through the garden grounds was a central goal in many civic improvements. Further, the botanical expertise embodied in the gardens staff

was drawn on in planning other floral projects, including William Lyon Mackenzie King's Kingsmere in Gatineau. Indeed, in the era in which the Experimental Farm was established, encouraging gardening as a pastime was seen as a way to boost morale, and fight Bolshevism and foreign ideals!

The second part of the book changes focus, shifting from the botanists to the botany. Short chapters on each of the main collections are presented: roses, peonies, lilies, lilacs, crabapples, a dozen in all. Hinchcliff reviews the work done on each group at the Experimental Farm, and highlights the varieties that can be found in the gardens today. Some of the details from the historical section are repeated – not enough to become repetitive, but enough that you could read the chapters out of order without confusion.

There's a bit more botanical information here, including illustrations of the different types of peony blooms, guides to lilac colours and flowering time, and a checklist of roses released from the Experimental Farm. That said, *Blooms* remains primarily a celebration of the gardens, but with more than enough details to entice us to (re)visit the gardens to chase down some of the plants he describes. Hinchcliff very helpfully provides maps of the gardens at the end of the book, to encourage us to do just that. And if you do, you may also be interested in Hinchcliff's previous book, *For the Love of Trees*, a guide to the trees of the Central Experimental Farm arboretum, co-authored with Roman Popadiuk.

At \$35.00, *Blooms* is a steal. It is not available from general online booksellers, but you may purchase a copy directly from the Friends of the Central Experimental Farm, with details at their website: friendsoftfarm.ca. Richard Hinchcliff is a long-time volunteer and current board member with this group.

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