



In gardens, play's the thing

Never mind what T.S. Eliot said about next month being the cruelest. If Canada's largest flower and garden show is any indication, outdoor spaces are all about fun, fantasy and escape this year, **Janny Sinopoli** writes

Like its previous incarnations, the 2009 Canada Blooms show that concluded in Toronto on Sunday was a riot of glorious spring bulbs, duelling amateur floral arrangements and expertly executed garden designs.

For all of the natural splendour on display, however, it was a decidedly unnatural installation that stole the show, Canada's largest flower and gardening festival.

Created by Stéphane Halm-Voisard and Karine Corbeil of Montreal-based Rita Design (www.ritadesign.ca), a surrealist landscape of oversized cardboard conifers mimicking those pine tree air fresheners that drivers hang from rear-view mirrors proved a big hit with passersby, who were encouraged to pluck them from nearby racks and "plant" them in slots cut into the floor.

Titled *Passe-moi un sapin*, Rita ("Pass the pine tree, Rita"), the installation was first unveiled during last summer's International Garden Festival

at Reford Gardens in Grand-Métis, Que., where it sat in an actual forest.

At Canada Blooms, the premise was especially attractive to children, who frolicked through the artificial grove by the dozens.

"It is very popular with kids," said Alexander Reford, the former academic who assumed the directorship of Reford Gardens, on his great-grandmother Elsie's legendary Gaspé estate, in 1995. Looking on from the sidelines in Toronto last week, he added that *Passe-moi* was, in fact, one of his acclaimed garden festival's most popular creations of recent years.

According to Rita, the intent behind the installation wasn't "to make a particular social statement, but to bring a smile to the faces of visitors." If the juxtaposition of a modern consumer cliché with real trees and flowers evokes loftier issues, such as our environmental impact, so be it. Participation is what really in-

terests the designers, who envisioned their synthetic wonderland as a giant, hands-on playground.

Playgrounds, in fact, were a recurring theme at this year's show. Designed by Adam Bienstock of Gardens for Living in Dundas, Ont., a fanciful "natural playground" featuring tree-stump seating, a living willow tunnel and animal sculptures won a raft of awards, including those for universal access and overall creativity. The firm (www.naturalplaygrounds.ca) specializes in spaces that engage and stimulate children.

Much more adult in tone and function, the clean-lined, "Canadian-style" outdoor room by Sander Design of Toronto (www.sanderdesign.ca) could have been regarded as an urban hipster's after-work playground. Think reclaimed-oak screens, a stainless steel bar, muted green and white plantings in geometric pots.

And in the magical four-season garden by Vaughan, Ont.-

based D.A. Gracey & Associates (www.dagracey.com), a snowy winter landscape gave way to spring blooms and the promise of outdoor summer fun on the shore of a pristine pond.

Amid all of these high-concept spaces and broad designer strokes, however, a number of small pleasures also surfaced - literally. Mini plants - from tiny phalaenopsis orchids to pint-sized candelabra plants - were plentiful in the event's marketplace section, where big-box suppliers such as Sobey's (www.sobeys.com) were enjoying a brisk trade in them.

At a time when perceived frills aren't exactly high on many priority lists, both the size of the plants and their prices (from \$9.99 for a potted orchid) clearly allowed visitors to take home some natural tonic with untroubled consciences.

And like those oversized cardboard trees, doing so put smiles on many faces.

CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: D.A. Gracey & Associates' four-season garden imagines wintry landscape giving way to spring blooms and summer fun; wrought-iron orbs filled with weather-resistant orange tulle hang from a 30-foot oak tree in the Landscape Ontario garden designed by Garden Creations Ottawa (www.gottawa.com); Rita Design's whimsical faux forest was originally created for the International Garden Festival in Grand-Métis, Que., where it stood in an actual wood. PHOTO BY LOUISE FANGUAY FOR JARDIN DE MÉTIS/REFORD GARDENS