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TRAVEL + FOOD —by Katie Zdybel

## Replete Retreat

The garden is the heart of **Hollyhock**, and eating its bounty is a nurturing experience for all those who make the journey.



Katie Zdybel

The kitchen at Hollyhock: nature is just outside

**T**hough I have travelled, and sometimes lived, in such far-flung and aesthetically blessed places as California, Paris, the Yukon, Tuscany and Costa Rica, I was not prepared for the wild and stunning beauty of Cortes Island. By the time I'd made my way from Victoria to Campbell River, Campbell River to Quadra Island, and Quadra to Cortes, I felt as though I had traversed into a completely different nation, even a different time.

The island, smelling of cedar, salt and a pure, unadulterated lack of pollution, gave the immediate impression of being one sprawling, uninhibited garden. Every inch of Cortes seems to be covered in greens, pinks, oranges and bursts of yellow with the piercing peacock blue of the ocean always in sight. The abundant greenery both towers above you, in the form of giant Douglas firs, and below you in the shape of prehistoric-looking ferns. There is a moment, when one leaves the normalized city scenes of box stores, traffic, skyscrapers and rows of houses behind, when I think even the most dedicated urbanophile looks around at a wild place and becomes, quite naturally, a bit more human. Then a remarkable thing happens all on its own; we relax.

Hollyhock, a 27-year-old resort and education centre on a southern crest of Cortes, encapsulates some of the island's most extraordinary features. Perched on a hill overlooking the ocean, the old farmhouse-now-lodge is wrapped with a cedar porch for sitting, dining and digesting. Walk through the breezy, sunlight-flooded, hardwood-floored interior straight through to the back and there lies the famous one-acre garden.

It's the kind of garden that stops you in your tracks. Designed to show off its contrasting colours and shapes in a range of layers, it eschews—for the most part—traditional rows for spirals, curves, twists and turns. Designed around a centuries-old apple tree that was a part of the original homestead, the garden has so many varieties of flowers and vines, herbs, vegetables, fruits and grasses, you could spend a day just learning their names. In case that's what you crave, wooden chairs are tucked in here and there so that you can sit and study or maybe just nap next to the irises or under the rose trellis.

The garden, it is clear, is the heart of Hollyhock. It's here the original founders came up with the resort's name after the giant red blossoms, and it's here the longest-serving employee still plucks and weeds, plants and harvests, coaxes seedlings, guides students and WWOOFers and, with utmost respect, works with the soil and the weather to grow what becomes some of the best produce I've ever tasted.

Nori Fletcher, head gardener, has been gardening at Hollyhock for 27 years. "We aim to make the most of the space," she says looking over the abundant acre. It is a slight understatement. For farming aficionados, the Hollyhock garden is grown in the French

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intensive style, with the use of some biodynamic rules. And it is, of course, completely organic and always has been. Trailing Nori around the garden as she describes past seasons—the “great black slug invasion,” or the year the raspberries got a virus—it becomes clear how hands-on her style of gardening is. There are no shortcut chemicals, gadgets or machinery. When the garden was infested with slugs, she and her assistants picked them out every day by hand, filling jugs at a time. This kind of gardening is hard work, but with the view of the ocean, the hushing sound of the towering trees all around, soft music and light chatter from the lodge drifting out, it also gives the impression of being quite nurturing work.

“The mission from the beginning has been to nourish people with the environment, the food and the programs,” marketing manager Greg Osoba tells me. “That has never changed.” He would know; next to Nori, he is the longest-term employee, rounding out his 20 years with a variety of position changes from housekeeper, kitchen help and now marketing manager.

I have my first taste of the food at dinnertime. But first of all, before you even get to the dining room, you’re asked to leave your shoes behind at the front deck. Padding across the wooden floors instantly takes me back to summer cottage memories. Is it even possible to hurry through a meal when you’re barefoot and outdoors? I join the line around the dining table where the plates and silverware are stacked neatly beside a big-bellied Buddha statue. Hollyhock serves its meals communal-style: a spread of wide platters and deep bowls are filled with herbed salmon, greens picked moments ago, housemade dressings, potato salad speckled with garden herbs, hot-out-of-the-oven biscuits beside a deep dish of organic butter and heaps more vegetables. I shuffle around the table with the other guests, appreciating the rose blossoms artfully scattered here and there, then having filled my plate find a table on the back deck with a wide view of the ocean as far as the eye can see.

To say their food is nourishing is only the beginning. The herb-encrusted salmon tastes vitally fresh and the texture reveals that it has been perfectly baked. The herbs too are potent and clearly straight from the garden. The biscuits are some of the best I’ve ever tried, that perfect texture of crumbly, warm and moist all at once. Even the butter tastes exceptionally sweet and creamy, and the fresh greens would have been just as delicious undressed, humming as they do with a summery verdant crispness.

For dessert—lest you think you may be eating *too* healthily—is a chubby little dark chocolate cupcake collapsing under the weight of a generous spread of chocolate cream cheese icing and asterisked whimsically with a tiny violet flower. They’re buttery, moist, just sweet enough, and quite pretty.

This first meal sets the tone for all the others I enjoy at Hollyhock. Consistently when I sit down to eat, at least one thing at every meal completely arrests me and I find myself wondering what are these flavours, how does this taste so good, what exactly am I eating. When I sit down with food and beverage manager Rebeka Carpenter, she tells me the menus are a team effort and part of what makes the food here so extraordinary is the creative collaboration that goes on in the kitchen and the garden.

What doesn’t come from their own garden, the cooks source from other parts of Cortes. A growers’ co-op and farmers’ market supplies some of the vegetables that grow less well in Hollyhock’s backyard. “We are almost a self-sustaining island,” one employee tells me. “The idea of supporting local is very strong here.” On the ferry ride over from Quadra, a fellow passenger who farms on Cortes told me that the local food co-op is fundraising to buy a travelling kitchen for butchering meat and washing and processing produce, so that more Cortes farmers and gardeners can sell their goods commercially. He rattles off the names of some farms and gardens I should visit if I have the time and tells me that I could spend a couple months just visiting the different farms and producers around the island.

Hollyhock, though it is only one small part of the island, is an amazing way to experience Cortes. It has been designed around the idea that the nature it is seated upon is its finest attribute. The guest cottages, activity and bodywork cabins, the lodge itself and yoga studio are nestled into the trees and connected by footpaths. Care has been taken not to cut down too many trees. There’s no vast golf course, no paved-over patios, no massive swimming pools, no distracting televisions. It is simple, but comfortable—even luxurious feeling in spots (such as the two hot tubs perched at the top of the hill overlooking the ocean, perfect for watching the moon rise). But the self-indulgence is never at the cost of the environment. Small reminders everywhere encourage guests to help them save on energy, cut down on waste by composting scraps, turning a light off behind them, reusing their towels. The experience has all the simplicity of being a guest at a good friend’s cottage with the added luxury of having every meal expertly prepared and exquisitely fresh.

When people speak of the raw and stunning beauty of British Columbia, of the incredible variety and quality of food that grows here, and the laid-back lifestyle that often accompanies it, this is exactly what they mean. Hollyhock is a quintessential B.C. experience and should be enjoyed by travellers and natives alike.

Hollyhock, Manson’s Landing, Cortes Island, B.C., (800) 933-6339 or (250) 935-6576, [www.hollyhock.ca](http://www.hollyhock.ca)

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