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Celebrating its 100th year, the RHS Chelsea Flower Show has certainly stood the test of time. But for garden enthusiasts yearning for something different, 2014 offers another horticultural option, in China. For six months from next April, Qingdao will host the world's biggest international horticultural exposition (www.qingdaoexpo2014.org).

The size of the project is breathtaking. Set in a rugged mountain valley, more than 2sq km of landscape profiling is creating a horticultural showcase of the best China has to offer. There are futuristic pavilions housing exhibitions exploring the history, science and culture of Chinese horticulture.

From a 2.3ha biodome centre piece, a flower promenade and tree-lined boulevard connect the exhibitions with 12 different gardens, including a children's dream garden, tea garden, blossom garden and mountain garden. With 12 million visitors anticipated, a horizon dominated by construction and cranes hints at the magnitude of the event.

I was in Qingdao hunting heritage trees. A national reverence for these ancient living many still survive, making them favourite destinations for ecotourists. China has a proud heritage of big, old and culturally significant trees, often tucked away in remote monasteries, equal to anything in the west. With a population of more than eight million, Qingdao matches New York and London in size, but its growth was recent, which left it devoid of trees to buffer the vertical concrete towers. In typical Chinese fashion, the solution was simple – plant all available space with semi-mature trees. I saw hundreds of thousands of new trees, many 12–15m high, all recently planted.

The ambition and vision is staggering. As this industrial-scale planting matures, the desolation of intense urban development is being transformed into a verdant, world-class destination. There are some lessons here about gardens, trees, culture and urban design, and the 2014 Expo may be an opportunity to see for yourselves.

