



Phlox are very popular in Russia. Sisters Svetlana Voronina and Margarita Barbuhatti grow about a hundred in their garden.

From Russia with passion

Sergey Kalyakin

Have you ever heard about contemporary Russian gardens? Yes, they do exist. Of course the history of gardening in Russia is not as extensive nor as rich as in the UK, but it may be interesting to have a look at gardens created in a very different climate, using different plants.

Almost everything about Russian gardening is different, but the passion for plants and gardens is just as remarkable as in Great Britain.

The Moscow area

Olga Bondareva is one of the most successful modern Russian planthunters. In

her garden (fig. 1), about 100 km north-east of Moscow, she has many collections including: *Pulsatilla* (Olga introduced *Pulsatilla flavescens* (fig. 2) into mass cultivation in Russia), *Paeonia*, *Galanthus*, *Gentiana*, *Daphne*, *Primula*, *Penstemon*, *Epimedium*,



Natalya Melnikova's garden is a Russian garden as it should be!



Fig. 1 Olga Bondareva's garden near Moscow.

Cypripedium, and many other alpine and woodland plants. For ten years Olga has been exploring populations of *Daphne juliae*, and she has found many new decorative forms. Another result of her planthunting is a new species of snowdrop – *Galanthus panjutinii* (fig. 3) – which was described officially following her expeditions to the Caucasus (it was probably discovered in the 19th

century but not described, so her role was to collect this rare *Galanthus*). Olga has also introduced some dwarf conifers, her favourite *Picea pungens* 'Hovanka'.

Tatyana Polyakova is a regional vice-president of the International Lilac Society for Russia and Asia. Her private garden (fig. 4) contains a huge collection of lilacs – about 50 Russian and 80 foreign varieties of *Syringa vulgaris*



Fig. 2 *Pulsatilla flavescens*.



Fig. 3 *Galanthus panjutinii*.

and 20 Preston hybrids. In addition she breeds her own lilac cultivars. Her other favourite is peonies (fig. 5). As a result there is no more available space in the garden, and already lilacs adorn some neighbouring gardens and public areas. The complete street is in bloom in the spring! The best and most beautiful of all, Tatyana says, is *Syringa vulgaris* 'Mechta' (fig. 6), bred by L A Kolesnikov in 1941.



Fig. 4 Tatyana Polyakova's garden.



Fig. 5 Lilacs and peonies, a stunning combination.

Fig. 6 *Syringa vulgaris* 'Mehta'.

Natalya Melnikova has a Russian garden as it should be, in my opinion. It looks like a mix of everything: it reminds me a bit of a pre-revolution manor, it has the atmosphere of the art of Polenov and Levitan, and everyone can feel the spirit of a soviet intellectual's dacha (page 16 & fig. 7). It is a great pleasure that most of the plants are typically Russian, from angelica and birches to *Viburnum opulus*. Natalya's hobby contrasts with her choice of garden treasures – she likes to raise exotic plants from seed so her magnificent conservatory is a lovely bonus for visitors to the garden. Natalya organises courses for gardeners, and her school has already had guests from the UK whom she has helped to visit more Russian gardens.

Famous German gardener and phlox breeder Karl Foerster once said that a garden without phloxes is a nonsense. Russians exemplify this rule: it's impossible to imagine any Russian garden without phloxes. Elena Groshaven, granddaughter of famous Soviet breeder P G Gaganov (everybody knows his *Phlox paniculata* 'Uspek'), has a collection of about 40 of her grandfather's heritage varieties. Her garden (fig. 8) has a very special microclimate, so a big *Magnolia kobus*, which flowers every year, and *Acer japonicum* 'Aconitifolium' survive although neither



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Fig. 7 Natalya Melnikova's garden in winter.



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Fig. 8 Elena Groshaven's garden enjoys a milder microclimate.



Fig. 9 Their garden is in a pine forest.

tree successfully overwinters elsewhere in the Moscow area. Besides the phloxes, the highlight of Elena's garden is a huge collection of rare plants including species from the Far East.

The St Petersburg area

Each year at the end of July, sisters Svetlana Voronina and Margarita Barbuhatti organize an exhibition entitled *The World of Phloxes* at St Petersburg

Botanic Garden. They show about 200 varieties of *Phlox paniculata* (about 1000 Russian/Soviet varieties are known at the moment, 500 of them in wide cultivation) and around 80 new Russian cultivars. Every year, and all truly different! This exhibition has had visitors from many European countries, and it is a pity that no British gardeners attend – they seem to have little interest in phlox breeding and Russian varieties.

In their shady garden the sisters give the most sunny area to about a hundred favourite cultivars. The garden (fig. 9) is located in a pine forest, so it makes sense to grow rhododendrons, ferns, and cypripediums (fig. 10) and other garden orchids. Their collection of *Meconopsis* (fig. 11) is very interesting, especially as



Fig. 10 Cypripediums thrive.



Fig. 11 *Meconopsis* seed is exchanged through the *Meconopsis* Group of The Scottish Rock Garden Club.



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Figs 12 & 13 Irina Pyzhikova's architectural garden.

the sisters exchange seeds through the Meconopsis Group of The Scottish Rock Garden Club.

Irina Pyzhikova is an architect and she used an architectural approach in creating her garden (figs 12 & 13). The ground is divided into different green rooms, each with its own style. The plants are tall and bold, the lines are showy and clear. Irina has a large collection of ornamental grasses and a lot of experience, so she finds suitable plants for all types of conditions.

Elena Solovieva describes her garden as a "crazy plantlover's place"! She is interested in all kind of plants, but her biggest passion is dwarf conifers and alpines (fig. 14). Every year Elena takes part in garden trips to the Czech Republic to get the newest cultivars.

The garden of Olga and Vasily Kobets is based on a splendid collection of conifers which provide an all-year-round decorative



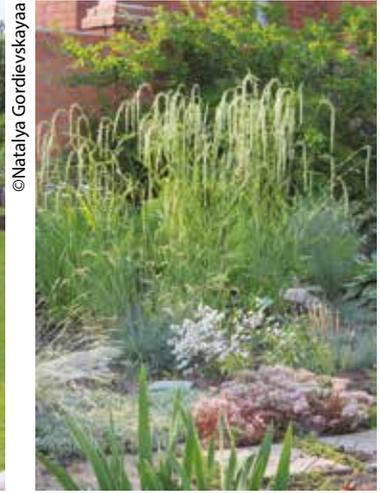
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Fig. 14 Elena Solovieva's "crazy plantlover's place".



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Fig. 15 Olga and Vasily Kobets' garden has a framework of conifers.



Figs 16 & 17 Natalya Gordievskaya's Siberian garden was famous in Russia.

skeleton, while flower plantings fill the gaps between the trees and shrubs (fig. 15). Olga has no doubts about taking out any plants which don't suit her scheme, so the garden is flawlessly harmonious.

Siberia

Natalya Gordievskaya moved last year from the Kemerovo region to Moscow, but her beautiful Siberian garden was pretty famous in Russia, so it should be mentioned anyway. She described her garden as typically Russian with a Siberian accent, although it had the calmness of an English cottage garden, the sun and brightness of a Mediterranean garden, and

the grassy wildness and transparency of Oudolf-style plantings (figs 16 & 17). The Siberian climate is an extreme continental climate of harsh winters and hot summers – every year Natalya had a good crop of watermelon! The soil was sandy and extremely dry, so the plants had to survive or not, just as in Beth Chatto's Gravel Garden. Of course, Natalya paid special attention to dry-tolerant plants; some she found in the surrounding area and brought to the garden, for example graceful *Elymus sibiricus*, *Peucedanum morisonii* with fine-laced leaves, and *Echium vulgare* which attracted lots of bees.

Now Natalya is busy with a new garden near Moscow.

For this article I have chosen only private gardens made by their owners. They are only a tiny selection from the large number of Russian gardens. We're currently starting to organise garden open days. Domestic travel agencies already offer garden tours in the Moscow and St Petersburg areas. The possibilities for garden lovers to travel in Russia grow year by year, and we would be both very happy and proud to see you in our gardens – you are most welcome!

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Sergey Kalyakin is a Russian journalist who has written more than 100 articles about European gardens, including interviews with John Brookes and Piet Oudolf, in Russian garden magazines.