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Private botanical gardens in Russia: Between noble culture and scientific professionalization (1760s–1917)

(1) Introduction

For centuries, Russia was known as an archetypically agricultural country that has lived off arable farming; grain export accounted for the main portion of state revenue. It is widely believed, therefore, that the attitude of Russian landowners towards plants was purely economic; they concentrated on improvement of industrial crops important for increasing yields. However, as our research shows, for quite a few noble private individuals interest towards plants did not stop with crop fields; it was in fact frequently stimulated by motivations somewhat removed from pragmatism. Garden design and plant collection became no less important for Russian noblemen than farming. Such a passion became an aesthetic amateur pastime, a “scientific experimenting”, and sometimes a sophisticated formula for relieving the boredom of the Russian provincial life as well. This makes Russia akin to England, with its tradition of interplay between agriculture and garden design.¹ Russia gave birth to a peculiar gardening tradition, influenced mainly by the lifestyles of the landed gentry. Garden design and botanical collection became a part of noble culture. The historical, socio-cultural, and scientific aspects of Russian private botanical gardens are the focus of the proposed paper.

(2) Early Initiatives: Monastery and Czars Gardens

Russian gardens, which merit experts’ attention on their own, are of interest in the European context as well for several reasons. First, as other cultural institutions, classical botanical gardens in Russia were modeled on those in countries like England, France and Germany. Secondly, they accommodated good many European botanists, who came to Russia for high professional status and financial prosperity. Finally, Russian botanical gardens, which possessed a number of unique plants, freely exchanged their collections with Kew, Paris, Versailles, Vienna, Berlin, etc.

A few words should be said about the history of Russian gardens *per se*.

For centuries, Russia formed its own culture of garden design, which borrowed from Orthodox Church tradition. The origin of gardens in Russia dates back to Kiev Russia in the 11–12th centuries, when Byzantine monks created first gardens in Kiev under the monasteries’ aegis. Inevitable centrepiece of such a garden would have been an apple tree and other fruit trees, cultivated both for utilitarian and aesthetic purposes. In the middle ages, monastery gardens appeared in all Russian principalities — from Kiev to Novgorod and Moscow.² According to Russian horticulturalist and historian of gardens A. E. Regel,

the monastery gardens entranced local inhabitants and pious Czars and Czarinas alike. After the monastery gardens there appeared at first Czarist, and also, of course, boyar gardens, which were as closely modeled on the monastery ones as possible, and in the end the locals followed suit, which resulted in the whole of Moscow being adorned with gardens.³

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¹ See: Headfield, M. *Pioneers in Gardening*. London, 1955.

² For more details on the medieval gardens in Russia, see: Cherny, V.D. “Typology and Evolution of Russian Medieval Garden” (In Russian). *Russian Estate*, 2002. 8 (24), pp. 27–40; Vergunov, A. P., Gorokhov, V.A. *Russian Gardens and Parks* (In Russian). Moscow, 1988.

³ Regel, A.E. *Decorative Horticulture and Designed Gardens* (In Russian). S.–Petersburg, 1896, p. 15.

Thus, the Czarist gardens appeared in the 15–16th centuries; they were closely modeled on the monastery ones. The situation began to change under Czar Alexey Mikhailovich. During his rule in the second half of the 17th century, first attempts were made to examine European examples of garden design.

(3) Peter I: Reforms of garden design

However, it was his son Peter (Peter I, nicknamed “the Great”, ruled in 1689–1725), who changed the tradition drastically. In the context of Peter’s reforms the idea of a garden acquired cultural and political resonance. Peter understood perfectly that the garden was primarily and foremost a place of enlightenment and education. Under Peter’s instructions, gardens and parks were designed to accelerate the process of “Europeanization” of the country, along with academies, universities and art galleries. The garden, now full of sculptures, fountains, green labyrinths, and specially designed plants, told the Russians about European symbolism and mythology, which enabled them to converse with foreigners on a common cultural ground. The semantics of gardens were of primary importance in Peter’s garden reform.⁴

The idea of a botanical collection was also implemented into the Russian garden during Peter’s reforms. In a way, we could refer to Peter as the first real patron of garden design and plant collection. He got involved in every detail of collecting, and gave highly qualified instructions about places to visit and specimens to bring.⁵ In 1710s, he invited a number of landscape designers, gardeners and botanists from all over Europe to set up his gardens near St. Petersburg, including Letny (“Summer”) garden and Gatchina garden. Starting the construction, Peter visited the finest park ensembles of France (including Versailles), where he examined the details of High Baroque, or French formal style of garden design, and made his own sketches.⁶

Under Peter’s supervision, new Medical Gardens were set up in the beginning of the 18th century in Moscow and St. Petersburg, which were later turned into the largest botanical gardens: Moscow University Botanical Garden, and Imperial St. Petersburg Botanical Garden (today known as Komarov Botanical Institute).

In the meantime, due to Peter’s expansionist policy Russia became an empire. The exploration of new territories had major consequences on the collection work undertaken in Moscow and Petersburg, and its expansion into the provinces (Voronezh, Tobolsk, and other places where Medical Gardens appeared). In a way, setting up these gardens reflected the setup of the empire — collecting plants from remote regions symbolized the unification of the empire.⁷

Thanks to Peter, the construction of gardens became a “fashion” among the court elite. All of Peter’s boyar associates hired designers and botanists to create their own gardens. A famous one was Oranienbaum set up in 1723 by count Menshikov, where oranges were cultivated for the first time in Russia (which gave Oranienbaum its name).⁸

(4) Catherine II and first botanical collections

The second half of the 18th century — the period associated with Catherine II (nicknamed “the Great”, ruled in 1762–1796) was a time of prosperity for gardens in the empire. At that time, Russia held a position as one of the leading countries in the garden arrangement. According to reports from the Historic Garden Committee of the International Council on Monuments and Sites (ICOMOS),

⁴ For more detailed discussion, see: Likhachev, D. S. *The Poetry of Gardens. On the Semantics of Gardens’ and Parks’ Styles* (In Russian). S.-Petersburg, 1991.

⁵ See: *Letters and Papers of Peter the Great* (In Russian). S.-Petersburg, Moscow–Leningrad. 1900, 1975, 1977.

⁶ Dubyago, T. B. *Russian Gardens and Parks of Formal Style* (In Russian). Leningrad, 1963.

⁷ For more details, see: Elina, O. Yu. “From the Czar’s Gardens to the Experimentiya Station: Agronomy Experiments on the Russian Country Estate” (In Russian). *Voprosy Istorii Estestvoznaniya I Tekhniki (VIET)*. 2005. Vol. 1–2.

⁸ Kocharyants, D. A., Raskin A. G. *Gardens and Parks of the Palaces Ensembles of S.-Petersburg and its suburbs* (In Russian). S.-Petersburg, 2003.

in the 18th century 65 gardens were created in Russia (for comparison, 71 were set up in England, 66 — in Italy, 51 — in France).⁹

The development of gardens was assisted by the socio-economic policy under Catherine's rule. Reflecting the growing power of the empire, and rapid expansion into the newly colonized territories, a number of scientific expeditions were undertaken, including the round-the-world ones; they delivered plants and seeds to Czarist and Medical gardens in Moscow and St. Petersburg. At that time, Russian gardens turned into unique spaces, which presented specimens from all over the world.

Another reform of Catherine's rule was the land reform, which resulted in the formation of estate gentry as a separate class. Estates quickly acquired a representative significance. The flourishing agricultural trade with Western Europe in combination with serf labor brought large profits for estate (landed) gentry, enabling them to spend enormous funds on luxury items, plants being amongst them. Botanical collection became part of a *noble culture* for the Russian estate aristocracy. It served as an amusement, an amateur scientific pastime, as a formula for enlightenment, and sometimes as a sophisticated means of relieving the boredom.¹⁰

A few words should be said about the Empress herself, who like Peter, became a supreme patron of botanical collection. Under her guidance, Czarist gardens received plants and seeds from the expeditions of the Imperial St. Petersburg Academy of Sciences as well as from the best collections of England, France and Italy. Moreover, in 1794 the first exchange took place: 220 specimens from Russia (predominantly Siberian species) were sent to Kew garden after an agreement had been achieved in private correspondence between Catherine and Sir Joseph Banks.¹¹

State patronage and leading role of academic institutions have been considered as the two main characteristics of science in Russia since the 18th century. This paper argues that at least in botanical collection amateur initiatives played an important role as well.

In the context of garden development, the second half of the 18th century in Russia was renowned for the appearance of private botanical gardens.

(5) “Exotic passion” of Prokopy Demidov: Neskuchny Botanical Garden

Neskuchny, probably the first private botanical garden in Russia, belonged to the prominent aristocrat of Catherine's era Prokopy Demidov (1729–1786). The Demidovs were a family of wealthy industrialists and art patrons, who became noblemen under Peter I. In 1756 Prokopy Demidov, who was famous for his “eccentricity” and “exotic passions”, started the construction of the French formal garden in the most beautiful place on Moskva River.¹²

There is no accurate data concerning scientific staff and management of Neskuchny garden. No references as to who exactly collected plants for Demidov. In his letters, he simply mentioned that four gardeners were working in Neskuchny, but no names. Demidov also mentioned the places from which he was getting specimens, botanical gardens in Vienna and Paris among them.¹³ Meanwhile, according to accurate sources, two scientists were in charge of the garden. They were Germans. One was an Academician of the Imperial St. Petersburg Academy of Sciences Peter-Simon Pallas. Second scientist was an Adjunct of Botany in the Academy George Steller (member of famous Vitas Bering Kamchatka expedition). Pallas, who first met Demidov sometime around 1770, probably delivered some specimens to Neskuchny from the Academy's expeditions to the central regions of Russia, Volga, and Southern

⁹ For the details of the ICOMOS data, see: Mikulina, E. M. *The History of Garden Design*. Doctoral theses. Moscow, 1984. P. 7–8.

¹⁰ For the details, see: Elina, “From the Czar's Gardens...”, pp. 18–21.

¹¹ See: Catherine II. *Assays and Memoirs* (In Russian). Moscow, 1990. P. 167; Carter, H. B. “Sir Joseph Banks and the plants collection from Kew sent to the Empress Catherine II of Russian, 1795”. *Bull. Brit. Mus. Nat. History*. 1974. Vol. 4, № 5.

¹² On Demidov family, see: Golovshchikov, K. D. *The Demidovs Noble Family* (In Russian). Yaroslavl', 1881; Yurkin, I. N. *The Demidovs — Scientists, Engineers, Organizers of Science and Industry* (In Russian). Moscow, 2001.

¹³ For the details, see: Family Line of the Demidovs, and Correspondence of Prokopy Demidov (In Russian). *Russian Archive*, 1873. № 11; Aleksandrov, L. P. *The Past of the Neskuchny Garden* (In Russian). Moscow, 1923.

Siberia in 1768–1774.¹⁴ And, Demidov, in his turn, handed over to Pallas seeds from Neskuchny and some herbaria sheets for Pallas' famous herbarium (according to some sources, Pallas was keeping his herbarium in Neskuchny). When speaking about Neskuchny in 1781, Pallas asserted, "This garden not only has no equal in Russia, but is also comparable to many famous botanical gardens in other countries in terms of rarity of the plants".¹⁵ In the same year, Pallas published "A catalogue for plants in the garden of Demidov" with 2000 species mentioned. According to the later 1806 catalogue, the garden collection included 4363 species. The herbarium of Neskuchny possessed around 4500 species from Europe, Asia, North and South Americas. It was granted to the Moscow University after Demidov's death and was partly destroyed during Moscow fire in 1812.¹⁶

Neskuchny was not Demidov's only experiment in constructing a botanical garden. In 1740s, a small garden appeared in Demidov's estate near Solikamsk in the Urals. Botanist George Steller, who stayed in Solikamsk on his way back from the Kamchatka expedition, used this garden to plant the dying collection of Kamchatka and Aleut islands species (about 80), which he was carrying for the Imperial St. Petersburg Academy of Sciences. Steller's specimens formed the base of the collection. It is known that Carl Linne, who was interested in Siberia flora, received seeds sent from Solikamsk by Demidov's brother Nikita, also an amateur botanist, one of Voltaire's correspondents from Russia. The academician Ivan Lepekhin, who visited Solikamsk garden in 1771, counted 422 species there, including the palm *Caryota urens* and other exotic plants.¹⁷

Following the death of its owner in 1786, Neskuchny garden gradually began to decline. Some rare plants went to the Moscow Medical Garden (from 1805 — the Botanical Garden of Moscow University); the Pallas herbarium was transferred to Gorenki — another private botanical garden to be discussed.

(6) Gorenki: Garden of new design and scientific enterprise

Gorenki was the most famous private botanical garden that had ever existed in Russia. Enormous Gorenki estate of around 730 hectares belonged to the prominent family line of Razumovsky counts.¹⁸ The botanical history of Gorenki began with count Alexei Razumovsky, who started his collection on the break of the 19th century. He invited architects and garden designers to build the palace and set up a decorative park laid out in the English landscape style. Furthermore, 42 hothouses were constructed — the main one, the Palm Glasshouse, was 12m high. In 1809, the only Russian vanilla tree bloomed in Gorenki Glasshouse. The palace housed an extensive botanical library, collection of seeds, and large herbarium. The construction of Gorenki cost Razumovsky more than one million rubles (an enormous sum of money in those days).¹⁹ "Inside the great Gorenki palace, among czarist luxury, he has locked himself in alone with his plants", wrote a contemporary about Razumovsky's devotion.²⁰ The garden did indeed amaze with its abundance and variety of plants. According to another witness account, "you would be simply astonished that a private individual could have amassed such a treasure

¹⁴ Zelenetsky, N. M. "Pallas, his Life, Scientific Activity, and Role in the Research of Russian Flora" (In Russian). *Memoirs of the Novorossiisk Society of Natural Sciences*. Odessa, 1906. Vol. 41.

¹⁵ Cited from: Aleksandrov, L. P., Nekrasova V. L. *Neskuchny Garden and its Plants* (In Russian). Moscow, 1923. P. 24.

¹⁶ See: Golovkin, B. N. *The History of Introduction of Plants in the Botanical Gardens* (In Russian). Moscow. 1981.

¹⁷ See: *Ibid.*; Yurkin, *The Demidovs — Scientists, Engineers, Organizers...*

¹⁸ On Razumovsky, see: Vasil'chikov, A. A. *Razumovskie Family Line* (In Russian). In 3 Vols. Vol. 2. St. Petersburg, 1880.

¹⁹ On the history of Gorenki Garden, see, for example: Nekrasova, V. L. "Gorenki Botanical Garden (to the History of Russian Botanical Gardens)" (In Russian). *Trudy Instituta Istorii Estestvoznaniya I Tekhniki*, 1949. Vol. 3, pp. 330–350; "The Description of Botanical Garden of Count Razumovsky in Gorenki near Moscow" (In Russian). *Journal of Horticulture*. 1859. Vol. VIII, pp. 123–133; Bondarenko, I. Gorenki (In Russian). *Starye Gody*. 1911. № 12, pp. 69–70.

²⁰ Virel', F. F. *Memoirs of F. Vigel'* (In Russian). Moscow, 1892. Vol. 3, p. 83.

trove of Nature from all the countries of the world in such a short period of time”.²¹ However, the count was merely a “private patron”, who hired botanists to collect plants and seeds for Gorenki.

Friedrich Christian Stephan, another German, the professor of Medical School in Moscow and director of its Medical Garden, was officially in charge of Gorenki in 1798–1803. Over this period, he had formed the basis of the collection. In Gorenki Stephan also conducted the research in taxonomy, in particular, he described the new genus *Biebersteinia*.²²

In 1804, the position of director was taken over by a young Russian graduate of Koenigsberg and Leipzig universities Ivan Redovsky. Redovsky had established contacts with European botanical gardens, which enabled him to expand the Gorenki collection significantly. The first catalogue, which included 2846 species, appeared in 1803 under his name. In 1805, Redovsky received the position of the Adjunct of Botany in the Imperial St. Petersburg Academy of Sciences. Next year he was sent to the Russian embassy in China as a “naturalist”. Redovsky never actually made it to China, and instead spent two years traveling in Siberia, engaged in collecting of plants and herbs. Throughout his long journey, he sent specimens to Gorenki.²³

After Redovsky’s death in 1809 the Gorenki garden was headed by Eriedrich-Ernst-Ludwig von Fischer, the graduate of Halle University. Thanks to Fisher, the best botanists of that time Langsdorf, Tausher, Helm, and others delivered specimens to Gorenki. Under Fisher’s supervision, special expeditions were launched, equipped by Razumovsky for plant hunting. For example, botanist Helm traveled over Orenburg steppes, the Ural Mountains, and Dauria gathering plants and seeds for Gorenki. The garden also acquired material brought by Russian travelers from Himalaya, Japan, Brazil and Alaska. Likewise, via Langsdorf, Razumovsky came into possession of seeds gathered during the round-the-world expedition of Ivan Krusenstern. According to data from the 1812 catalogue, Gorenki collection contained 8036 species. The collection of Siberian and Far Eastern plants was regarded as one of the best in the world. Scientific research with the Gorenki collection also reached its peak under Fisher. Fisher, who himself was interested primarily in Siberian plants, described a number of species together with taxonomist Mayer. Many botanists from the Imperial St. Petersburg Academy of Sciences, Moscow and St. Petersburg Universities, visited Gorenki to conduct research in plant taxonomy and morphology.²⁴

In 1809 Razumovsky and his associates founded the first botanical society in Russia — *La Societe Phytographique de Gorenki*. Among its members were Gorenki scientists like Fisher, Langsdorf, Stephan as well as leading botanists of the time: florist G. F. Hoffmann, professor of Botany in Erlangen, Gettingen and Moscow, author of “Flora Germanica”; student of Carl Linne, Swedish botanist Karl Thunberg; President of Carolina-Leopoldina Johann Christian Schreber; director of Berlin Botanical Garden Karl-Ludwig Vildenov; Alexander von Humboldt, and many others. The Society composed a Charter according to which one of the aims was to “extend the usefulness of the activities of the Gorenki botanists... and distribute them by means of establishing very close links with botanists from all around the world”.²⁵ The members of the society also decided that a magazine should be published. However, in 1810 the society was united with the Moscow Society of Nature Explorers (MOIP), and all the papers ready for print were published in the “Works of MOIP”.

The Gorenki garden existed only until the mid 1820s. After the death of Razumovsky in 1822, the collection was no longer kept in proper condition. Thanks to Fisher, who at that time became a Director of the Imperial St. Petersburg Botanical Garden, the most valuable plants, herbarium and the library were transferred to Petersburg; several plants ended up in Moscow University Garden. The remainder was sold to private individuals, primarily Moscow region landowners. However, one can detect a moment of “revenge” in this tragic outcome: in 1811, as the Minister for People’s Enlightenment, Razumovsky issued a decree to sell of the Academy of Sciences’ Botanical Garden — in the light of its “excessive expenses” and “failure to acquire any particular use.” The reason for Razumovsky’s

²¹ Svin’in, P. *Home Objects of Note, Published by Pavel Svin’in* (In Russian). Moscow, 1823. Vol. 3, p. 129.

²² Stephan, F. “Description de deux nouveaux genres des plantes”. *Mem. Soc. Nat. Moscou*. 1806.

²³ See: Nekrasova, “Gorenki Botanical Garden...”

²⁴ *Ibid.*

²⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 344.

decision may have been his own garden: having invested colossal sums into his passion, Razumovsky was very jealous of botanical work, in which he himself was not involved.²⁶

(7) Last private botanical garden: Ol'gino

Ol'gino, probably the last private botanical collection in Russia, stood out from the rest. It was created by professional botanists, who were at the same time patrons, managers, and collectors. Petersburg botanist Olga Fedchenko together with her son, also a botanist, created the Ol'gino garden in 1895 in their family estate near Moscow. Fedchenko was the second female member-correspondent of the Academy of Sciences in the country. A private garden gave an opportunity to extend her research. Fedchenko herself brought plants and seeds from numerous expeditions to Caucasus, Crimea, South Urals, Turkestan, West Tien Shan, and Pamirs. She also exchanged plants with a number of botanists and botanical gardens, including Vienna, Berlin, Geneva, Paris, and Kew. She wrote the classical treatises "Conspectus florum Turkestanicae", "Flora Pamirica", and others, and was the best specialist in Turkestan flora in the world. Many specimens, planted in Olgino, served for Fedchenko's taxonomic research, in particular, of genera *Eremurus* and *Iris*. *Eremurus olgae* Rgl. and more than 40 other species were named after Olga Fedchenko. This garden was destroyed by the Bolsheviks in 1921, and Fedchenko's collection died.²⁷

The full list of private botanical gardens is presented in the chart.

Private botanical gardens in the Russian Empire

	Name and place	Period	Patron/owner	Botanists in charge/visiting	Collection/Species
1.	Solikamsk, the Urals	1740s – 1760s	Demidov family	G. Steller, I. Lepekhin	422 sp. Rich in Siberian species
2.	Neskuchny, near Moscow	1756 – 1790s	P. Demidov	P.-S. Pallas	4363 sp.
3.	Blandov, near St.Petersburg	1789 –	M. Blandov	-----	Collection of African and American species
4.	Sofievka, Ukraine	1790s – 1805	Count F. Pototsky	-----	Collection of South Russian plants
5.	Gorenki, near Moscow	1796 – 1820s	Count A. Razumovsky	F. C. Steven, F.-L. Fisher, I. Redovsky	Apr. 9000 sp. Rich in Siberian species
6.	Nikol'skoye, near Moscow	1820s – 1860s	Count P. Trubetskoy	K. Enke	282 sp. Rich in palms
7.	Sochi, Caucasus	Second half of the 19th century	P. Tatarinov	P. Tatarinov	Apr. 200 Rich in Asian and American species
8.	Vvedenskoye, Caucasus	Second half of the 19th century	A. Vvedensky	-----	Collection of palms
9.	Solibauri, near Batumi, Caucasus	Second half of the 19th century	S. Ginkul	S. Ginkul	Collection of Asian and American Species
10.	Olgino, near Moscow	1896 – 1921	O. Fedchenko	O. Fedchenko, A. Fedchenko	Rich in Turkestan species, of <i>Eremurus</i>

²⁶ See: Bobrov, E. G. "Garden in Gorenki and the Last Years of the Academy of Sciences' Botanical Garden" (In Russian). *From Medical Garden to Botanical Institute*. Moscow–Leningrad, 1957, pp. 25–31.

²⁷ For the details on Ol'gino garden, see: Val'kova, O. A. Olga Aleksandrovna Fedchenko. Moscow, 2006.

(8) Conclusion

Now it is possible to outline some common characteristics, as well as differences between the above-mentioned gardens. Private gardens in Russia were set up in the estates of Russian gentry, in line with the noble cultural tradition, which united amateur and professional approaches. If early gardens existed thanks to amateur patrons, who invested in their own scientific passion and hired professionals to collect plants and conduct research, the later gardens became self-patronizing institutions, where scientists themselves were both patrons and clients. The management of some private gardens was quite successful, and teams of collectors and researchers were professional enough to create famous botanical institutions, which competed with the state ones. Constant exchange of samples — and scientists — with European botanical centers took place. This enabled a number of Russian botanists, both local and foreign by birth, to improve their socio-economic status. This allowed them to create unique collections, which later became valuable part of the Russian state botanical resources.