

Chapter 2

The Palimpsest of Urban Gardening in Russia

Family urban agriculture in Russia is a wide-scale phenomenon that involves a large portion of city-dwellers. A substantial proportion of garden plots have small houses where it is possible to stay overnight. A significant number of these plots are located in allotments. This gardening is a “palimpsest” in the sense that traces of ancient history remain underneath its present forms, despite policies after the 1917 October Revolution that aimed to make a clean slate of the past¹ to build a new world. This is how the representations inherited from the *votchina*, *pomestie*, *usadba*, *imenie*, and *dacha* have been perpetuated. The same holds true for the imprint of the decades from 1920–1940 related to the experiences of garden cities, socialist ideals, shortages and famines, and the desire for a good life.

2.1 Current Situation

2.1.1 Large-Scale Multifunctional Gardening

Of the world’s major countries, Russia is the one where urban gardening is the most widespread nowadays. The statistical services of the Russian Federation

“Palimpsest” is a word of Greek origin that means “rubbed smooth again”. The palimpsest is a manuscript written on previously-used parchment that had been rubbed to remove the prior writing so it could be used again. By extension, the word means a project carried out on the destruction of an earlier building, which keeps traces of its history. The term is used in the study of cities, architecture, and landscapes.

¹ A reference to a line in “The Internationale”: “Of the past let us make a clean slate”.

identify four categories of plots of land:² gardens (technically for food production and ornamental purposes), dachas, vegetable gardens, and a new category since 1995, namely, plots for building single-family homes (referred to in this book as “buildable plots”). In all, these four categories account for about 24 million plots of land covering more than 2.3 million ha. If we use the coefficient of 2.7 persons per household (2002 census), these plots concern about 64.8 million Russian city-dwellers. If we add other forms that are not listed, such as tracts in urban and suburban areas (approximately 2,000,000), the estimate may rise to around 70 million people. However, this figure is overstated; there are fewer gardeners than plots because some people hold several plots. Given the uncertainties, we use a range from 64.8 to 70 million people involved in urban gardening, or 62 to 66% of the urban population estimated at 105.45 million people in 2013.

The estimate of 50% for the city of Moscow (11.5 million inhabitants) places it slightly below this range. In St Petersburg (4,880,000 inhabitants in 2010), the slightly higher estimate by Vasily I. Zakhariachev (former head of the Department of Gardens and Vegetable Gardens of St Petersburg) is based on his own observations and data provided by the Administration of Gardens and Vegetable Gardens of this city.³ In large provincial cities such as Kazan, the proportion is certainly around 60%. It is higher in small towns.

Box 3. Another World

The representations forged by our own smugness, secure in its civilising values, shattered into pieces. The image of our small allotment gardens, where we try to rebuild a social fabric made deliquescent by flamboyant individualism, has nothing in common with the history of Russian gardens and their new emerging realities in a revolutionary movement of privatisation.

I remain very surprised by the scale of the ornamental aspect in the gardens at Gigantic with a variety of plants worthy of an English garden, with mixed borders and a rock garden kindly called “alpinum”.

Cross-Perspectives Programme, Gil Melin, Administrator of the National Federation of Family and Community Gardens of France, Kazan, July 2010.

² Data from 1980 to 2008 were collected and processed by the same or similar methods. Since 2006, they reflect the results of the 2006 agricultural census. Data come from surveys with members of allotment gardens (comprising gardens, vegetable gardens, and dachas) by the method of selective statistical observation. A selective sample of plots was created by systematic random sampling. The selection is based on a list of plots excluding those that were abandoned or never put in use. The respondent is the owner or user. In *Federal Service of State Statistics of the Russian Federation*, 2008.

³ It counted this year in its periphery (the region called Leningrad) 600,000 garden plots, 120,000 vegetable garden plots, and 180,000 plots in tracts.

Table 2.1 Population of the Russian Federation (millions of inhabitants). (Source: <http://www.statistiques.monde>)

Total Population in 2013	142.500	100 %
<i>Rural population</i>	37.050	26 %
<i>Urban population</i>	105.450	74 %

Table 2.2 Urban population affected by gardening (millions of inhabitants). (Source: Estimates from various sources. See text)

Urban population	105.450	100 %
City-dwellers with access to a plot of land	64.8 to 70	62 to 66 %
City-dwellers whose plot is located in an allotment	27	26 %
City-dwellers whose plot has a small house where they can stay overnight	43	41 %

Most of the plots are located in allotment gardens (comprising the four categories of gardens, vegetable gardens, dachas, and buildable plots). The Russian Gardeners Union considers that it represents approximately 10 million families of gardeners in these allotment gardens, i.e. about 27 million people.

Most city-dwellers with a garden plot use all or part of the plot for vegetable production. However, as will be described in the following chapters, these are essentially multifunctional spaces that answer multiple needs of individuals and families. The small garden house, where people can stay overnight, is an important component of this multifunctionality. According to estimates, more than 40 % of city-dwellers have such a small house ⁴ (Tables 2.1 and 2.2).

We can thus estimate that between 62 and 66 % of Russian city-dwellers have garden plots. More than one-quarter have their plot in an allotment garden. Allotment gardens number around 80,000, of which more than 70,000 are gardens (i.e. for food and ornamental purposes), 5,500 vegetable gardens, and 1,100 dachas. Approximately 40 % of the plots have a small house or shelter where people can stay overnight.

This activity has been the subject of constant attention from public authorities. Thus, more than 400 laws, decrees, and regulations were issued between 1940 and 1990. This is still the case today because of restructuring following privatisation and the attractiveness of the suburban housing model. This activity is now governed by the Constitution of the Russian Federation of 12 December 1993, the Land Code of 25 October 2001, and a set of other laws and regulations.⁵

⁴ Survey conducted in April 2007 by the Russian Centre for Public Opinion (interviews of 1,500 people in 100 cities). The exact result of the survey is 41 % for the 100 cities concerned, and 46 % for Moscow. Source: Izvectia.ru.

⁵ This is particularly the Federal Law No. 112 of 7 July 2003 entitled "On Garden Tracts"; Federal Law No. 172 of 21 December 2004 entitled "On the transfer of land or plots of land from one category to another"; Federal Law No. 191 of 29 December 2004 entitled "On the application of



Fig. 2.1 A small garden house on its plot. (© Louiza Boukharaeva. July 2010)

• Spaces for food production and vacationing

Among the gardens that do not have overnight shelter, there are individual gardens located next to people's primary residence. Also some vegetable gardens created in the crisis period of the 1980s and 1990s do not offer overnight shelter; the number of such gardens is currently declining. We also found plots of land in allotments located in cities that are near apartment buildings. The small garden houses or sheds often present are only used during the day (Fig. 2.1).

The garden with its small house is a space that can be used in many ways depending on the needs, desires, and constraints of the users. These needs vary with age, family composition, and income. In periods of financial difficulty, vegetable growing is the priority, and the plot can supply a substantial portion of a family's food (Box 4). In other times, vegetable production declines in favour of holiday functions (rest, recreation, restoring one's health, freedom to do what you want, strengthening family ties), but vegetable production can be increased again if necessary. This ability to manage multifunctional land according to household situation and needs gives the society greater flexibility.

Plots in allotment gardens and vegetable gardens range from 300 to 1,000 m² in size. Most are 600 m², hence the term *cheste sotok* ("six ares") used in everyday language. *Dacha* plots exceed 2,000 m² in size.

Box 4. The production of a plot

On an average plot of 600 m², there is a strawberry field of 60 m², 17 raspberry bushes, 19 currant bushes, 11 gooseberry bushes, 13 apple trees, ten

plum trees. And if we calculate the harvesting of 500 kg of vegetables, half of which potatoes, this covers the needs of a family of four for these products.

Proceedings of the Congress of the Russian Gardeners Union, 2005.

Due to its scale and its multifunctional potential, this urban gardening is thus a phenomenon that penetrates deep into the pores of Russian society. It is not a panacea for all difficulties. But it is a practical resource that people use to find solutions for many problems. It extends integral human habitat for a large portion of the population.

- **An area of the extra-professional, non-market economy**

In statistical and legislative documents, urban gardening is listed as a component of the “economy of the population” (“хозяйства населения”), which also includes garden tracts, individual exploitations of citizens in rural and urban areas, land for individual housing construction, and land managed by associations of livestock owners. These various categories of land are of several sizes, the traditional reference being 4,000 m² for garden tracts and 600 m² for garden plots. This land is not used for commercial activities. Its function is for families to enhance it and thus to contribute to their own needs for food, rest, and living space.

Basically, this urban gardening is a non-market activity mainly for home consumption. In fact, during production periods, selling is permitted on roadsides and around official markets. Harvests also give rise to gifts and local exchanges. In the Gardeners Survey, 268 of 290 respondents said that they share fruit, flowers, and medicinal plants with relatives, neighbours, and friends.

During the food crisis of the 1990s and until the mid-2000s, according to our estimates, urban gardens provided between one-third and one-half of Russian production of potatoes and fruit, berries, and vegetables. Currently, this food production is declining in favour of holiday (vacationing) functions.

In the most common cases, these gardens grow vegetables, flowers, medicinal plants, fruit trees, and berry bushes (228 of 274 responses in the Gardeners Survey). Men devote their time primarily to building and maintenance, while women prepare the produce and do canning. Men, women, and children work the garden and do landscaping. This is the ideal place for do-it-yourself, recycling, and inventiveness (Box 5).

Box 5. Nothing is lost, everything is reused

Most small garden houses were built with modest means (use of local wood, rebuilding with recovered materials...). Even today, the occupants of allotment gardens in Kazan make their small houses with logs of rough timber, debarked and jointed with felt or with bricks. They give a second life to collected materials, divert them, and use parts to create others. Thus, in the “Titanic” subdivision, a tanker truck is used as a water tower, old bathtubs are

buried to create pools surrounded by rocks, old toys are used as scarecrows, and sprinklers make a fountain. A worker in an aviation factory uses a titanium spade that is more efficient and lighter than anything found in stores. In this period of overconsumption, it is nice to see that in some communities, waste does not exist.

Gardens are covered with an impressive density of flowers and well-maintained vegetables.

Cross-Perspectives Programme. François Cottreel, Director of the Self-Production Programme and Social Development/ PADES, Kazan, July 2010.

Planting, maintaining, harvesting, canning, transporting and storing products, as well as building and maintaining fences around the small house and other facilities, takes a lot of time. This time varies depending on the family, ranging from 2 to 30 h per week for a 600 m² plot with a vegetable garden.

Urban gardening is not a market activity, but is nevertheless part of market relations, mainly upstream to purchase tools, fertilisers, seeds, and crop treatment products, especially for the building and upkeep of small houses, saunas, tool sheds, and greenhouses. This upstream economic activity is a longstanding form of informal economy, with workers from nearby agricultural enterprises (e.g. kolkhozes and sovkhozes) coming by notably to sell manure, with horse manure being particularly sought after. In addition, there is the supply of food products (eggs, milk, and meat) from these workers and new individual farmers. Furthermore, today, gardening areas are a developing market for companies, including subsidiaries of multinationals (such as Leroy Merlin and IKEA) specialised in the gardening supply business, which set up business nearby.

Some allotment gardens also generate full or part-time jobs to maintain common services (water, electricity, roads) and in some cases for security at large allotment gardens.

2.1.2 Considerable Space for Allotment Gardens, Vegetable Gardens, and Dachas

The approximately 80,000 allotment gardens of all categories (i.e. ornamental gardens, vegetable gardens, and dachas) have an average surface area of 15 ha. This can vary widely depending on the size and number of plots (a few dozens to several thousand). These allotment gardens, including approximately 10 million plots, are referred to as “gardening fellowships”, “allotment gardens” or “gardening, vegetable gardening, and dacha cooperatives”. Also, in current legislation, they are called “non-commercial unions of citizens for gardens, vegetable gardens, or dachas”. These entities are defined in legislation as “non-business organisations founded by citizens on a voluntary basis to support their members in achieving common tasks

of a socioeconomic nature in gardens, vegetable gardens, and dachas” (Federal Law No. 66 of 15 April 1998, “On non-commercial unions of citizens for gardens, vegetable gardens, or dachas”, Article 1). There are nuances differentiating these unions (Box 6).

Box 6. Allotment gardens, vegetable gardens, and dacha allotments⁶

Allotment vegetable gardens are intended “for the growing of berries, vegetables, gourds (cucurbits), and other crops, with or without the right to build a small inhabitable construction with its dependencies.” We note here that the land is dedicated to vegetable production. But it is possible to use them as modest holiday destinations thanks to the possibility to build a small house.

Allotment gardens are designed for the “production of fruit crops and small fruits, rest, with the right to build a house and outbuildings.” The multifunctionality recognised for these lands is wider, since fruit crops are mentioned. Not listed here is vegetable production, however, which was planned from the beginning of their creation (see above). The holiday destination function is explicitly recognised by the right to build a house.

Dachas allotments aim to provide “rest, with the right to build an inhabitable building or a house, and with the right to plant and produce various agricultural crops”. This definition is more focused on the holiday destination functions, while mentioning the right for production.

In reality, the three abovementioned categories of allotment gardens allow land to be used for both productive functions and as a holiday destination. The qualitative differences concern the right to plant trees (as a rule, not authorised in vegetable gardens) and especially the house, described as a light inhabitable construction in vegetable gardens. Differences also concern the surface area of the plots, with dacha plots usually larger than those of vegetable gardens and gardens.

Since 1995, a new statistical category was added for allotments that group together plots where people can build single-family homes (“buildable plots”). These designate allotments where people can now build detached homes (but this authorisation does not necessarily mean the houses are built). They have a garden area and/or a vegetable garden that is also used for production.

Around major cities, a sometimes large number of allotments are gathered into a “mega-garden” (or “massif”) occupying dozens of hectares. This is particularly the case around St Petersburg.

Every allotment garden has a name, and these are often quite evocative: *Synthesis* for the chemicals company’s allotment (Fig. 2.2) *Harmony* for the Academy of Music, *Optimistic* for an allotment created in the middle of the early-90s crisis. In the Gardeners Survey, several bore the name of the place where they were created

⁶ See the report of the State Land Registry Committee of 1 January 2008.



Fig. 2.2 The entrance to the *Synthesis* allotment garden. (© Louiza Boukharaeva. Source: Survey in Russia. Kazan. 2005)

(such as *Biriali*, *Kroutouchka*, *Ortloka*) or otherwise mentioned the location: *Akinskoe* (village area), *Avetchik* (place behind the river) *Volzhanka* (along the Volga). Many refer to the company or industry that created them: *Dorozhnik* (roadmen), *Garbounov* (aircraft manufacturing company), *KAI 774* (aircraft engine manufacturing company—774 kilometres from Moscow), *Nauka* (science), *Tatagrostroi* (farm building organisation) *Tectilechni* (textile workers). Other names are very different, and sometimes lyrical: *Atmosphere* (atmosphere), *Beriazovka* (village birch), *Beriozka* (small birch), *Cactus* (cactus), *Cooperator* (cooperator), *Cten-dientsi* (cold place), *Dubki* (small oak), *Druzhba* (friendship), *Orzione* (from the lake), *Ovochnik* (vegetable gardener), *Polanka* (glade), *Raduga* (rainbow), *Shigali* (surroundings), *Socnovie* (pines), *Solonichko* (little sun), *Soneitchinie* (solar), *Sosnovie Bor* (pine forest), *Stoletchnik* (centennial), *Vestna 78* (spring 1978), *Victoria* (a variety of strawberries), *Vissokaia Gara* (mountaineering), *Vokhitovets* (disciples of Vokhit), *Volskie Zori* (Volga Aurora).

• All ages and social categories in allotment gardens

We find almost all categories of the population in allotment gardens. This is particularity due to the way they were implemented. In the context of general shortage of the war and famine, each family was threatened. As a result, when creating allotments, the companies in charge addressed all their employees, transferred the requests for vegetable gardens to the State apparatus, which attributed plots, then gave them the responsibility to develop and maintain them. Priority was given to large families and war veterans. For others, everyone was entitled to a garden as a

Table 2.3 Declared professions in the Gardeners survey. (Source: Gardeners Survey. Answers to the question “What is your profession?”)

Teachers/ researchers students (62 responses)	Contractors— Managers— Engineering (42 responses)	White Collar— Medical Profes- sions—Lawyers (68 responses)	Retired (36 responses)	Other (52 responses)
<i>Teachers (20)</i> <i>Students (20)</i> <i>Pedagogues (4),</i> <i>Kindergarten</i> <i>teachers (6)</i> <i>Teachers in:</i> University Music school High school Language Russian language and literature Elementary school Mathematics	<i>Engineers (18)</i> <i>Contractors (16)</i> <i>Directors (8)</i>	<i>Accounting (20)</i> <i>Lawyers (12)</i> <i>Laboratory (6)</i> <i>Doctors and</i> <i>Nurses (8)</i> <i>Librarians (6)</i> <i>Economists (4)</i> <i>Other:</i> Insurance Broker Dentist Bank employee Official State official Speech therapist Technologist Cashier Secretary		<i>Salespeople (12)</i> <i>Housewives (8)</i> <i>Guards (4)</i> <i>Consultants (4)</i> <i>Chauffeurs (4)</i> <i>Welders (4)</i> <i>Other:</i> Unemployed Plumber Maid Cook Electrician Policeman Crane operator

rule, from the simple workman to the director. We find side by side in the allotments all professions, as shown by the responses to the Gardeners Survey (Table 2.3).

The age of the people answering the Gardeners Survey (288 responses out of the 290 usable questionnaires) reveals a generational renewal: 60 were under 30 years old, 176 between 31 and 60 years old, and 52 over 60 years old.

• Geographic locations and access

Allotment gardens were created throughout Russia, from the city of Arkhangelsk in the far north to the southern Caucasus. They are found in all climate zones and in nine time zones.

A small portion of allotment gardens is located within cities. The vast majority is in the periphery, sometimes dozens of kilometres away, as shown by the results to the Gardeners Survey conducted in Kazan (Table 2.4).

Bus and trolley bus lines allow for easy access to allotments located within or near the city. Most other allotments are close to railway stations. The automobile is used more and more frequently. In Kazan as in other cities along rivers, it is possible to take a boat to reach allotments located on the opposite bank of the Volga.

Table 2.4 Location of gardens surveyed in Kazan. (Source: Gardeners Survey)

	Within the city limits	Less than 10 km	11 km and more	TOTAL
Individual gardens	24	54	54	132
Allotment garden plots	32	20	88	140

2.2 Foundations

The representations and current practices of urban gardeners are connected with historical forms of land ownership and use in Russia, designated by the ancient words *votchina*, *pomestie*, *usadba*, *imanie*, and *dacha*. The terms *imanie* and *usadba* are reused in draft legislation presented in 2013 and 2014 (Chapter 4). The word *dacha* is widely used with broader meanings than those used outside Russia since the second half of the nineteenth century.

While the policy after 1917 tried to destroy old forms of ownership and land use, these words continued to be transmitted by literary classics, which have remained a foundation of school education, much more than in Western Europe and most other parts of the world. From the first years of primary school, children study literature an hour a day, plus an hour of Russian language. Hence through the works of Dostoyevsky, Fet, Gogol, Pasternak, Pushkin, Chekhov, Tolstoy, and many others, children appropriated representations that are reflected in the interviews, when gardeners of any social status spontaneously quote a work learned in elementary school or during their earliest childhood studies.

2.2.1 Words and Their Representations

The etymological analysis of these words and the identification of the realities that they have designated over history until today allow us to distinguish various common forms of relationships between city-dwellers and soils, gardening, and nature. These are concrete forms in which we find organisational and architectural features of the past. We can understand these specificities in particular through poetic and philosophical language.

• The dacha and the “spirit of a place”

The word *dacha* (Russian дач) was incorporated into many foreign languages beginning in the second half of the nineteenth century: *datcha* in French, *dacha* in English, Spanish, Portuguese and Esperanto; *Datscha* in German, *datxa* in Catalan; 畚 in Chinese, ダーチャ in Japanese. In these languages, it took on the meaning of “summer residence”. In Russia, the word has always had a broader, fuller meaning.

In the most authoritative dictionary of modern Russian lexicography,⁷ *dacha* was initially “the land given by the prince”, offered as a gift, “the prince made a present of land” (Max Vasmer, p. 486.) In the nineteenth century, the word began to refer to any area of land outside the city, given by the Tsar or the government or purchased, and intended for construction. Gradually, it indicated the construction itself and the land surrounding it. In this sense, it was used to name the second home, and spread

⁷ Max Julius Friedrich Vasmer. *Etymological Dictionary of the Russian Language, A to D*. Max Julius Friedrich Vasmer (1886–1962) was a German linguist born in Russia, having received all his education there, including his studies under the direction of Baudouin de Courtenay, an eminent Slavist. He worked at the University of Saratov until the socialist revolution. His *Etymological Dictionary of the Russian Language* remains today the most developed and most reliable.

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