

THE HOUSE IN THE WOODS

At a new Russian rural retreat, MOX Landscape Architects have given their client the magical English-style garden she dreamed of, with a mixture of decorative flowering and woodland plants that bloom and grow green in this haven hidden amid the forest gloom

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OPPOSITE, TOP LEFT: new, sympathetic planting of *Iris sibirica*, *Butomus umbellatus*, *Sagittaria* and shade-loving *Astilbe* 'Superba' (right) have turned the woodland pool into a treasured spot for the garden owner.

There are two great and contrasting garden traditions in Russia: classic 18th-century landscapes on an Imperial scale, and the intimate pleasures of the rural dachas which have always been prized by the country's elite.

Of these two, the dacha is the more enduring ideal, still offering a slice of the good life to the fortunate few – these days, more likely to be in business or entertainment than the aristocracy – who escape periodically to potter around and enjoy their kitchen gardens, flower beds and orchards.

Often, such gardens will be situated in the middle of a forest, usually of conifers or birches, which is allowed to encroach right into the ornamental areas close to the house. In style, the dacha garden is typically inspired by traditional English garden design that incorporates roses, greenhouses and potagers, leavened with a very Russian passion for colour born from the long hard winters in this part of the world. Think Cotswolds in a cold climate.

Some 50 miles north-west of St Petersburg is a particularly fine, contemporary interpretation of this traditional idiom, created by Yuri Fomenko and Dmitry Golubev of MOX Landscape Architects. 'In truth, we actually recreated it,' explains Dmitry. 'The house was built only 15 years ago and a garden was laid out at the same time, but it was not well done.

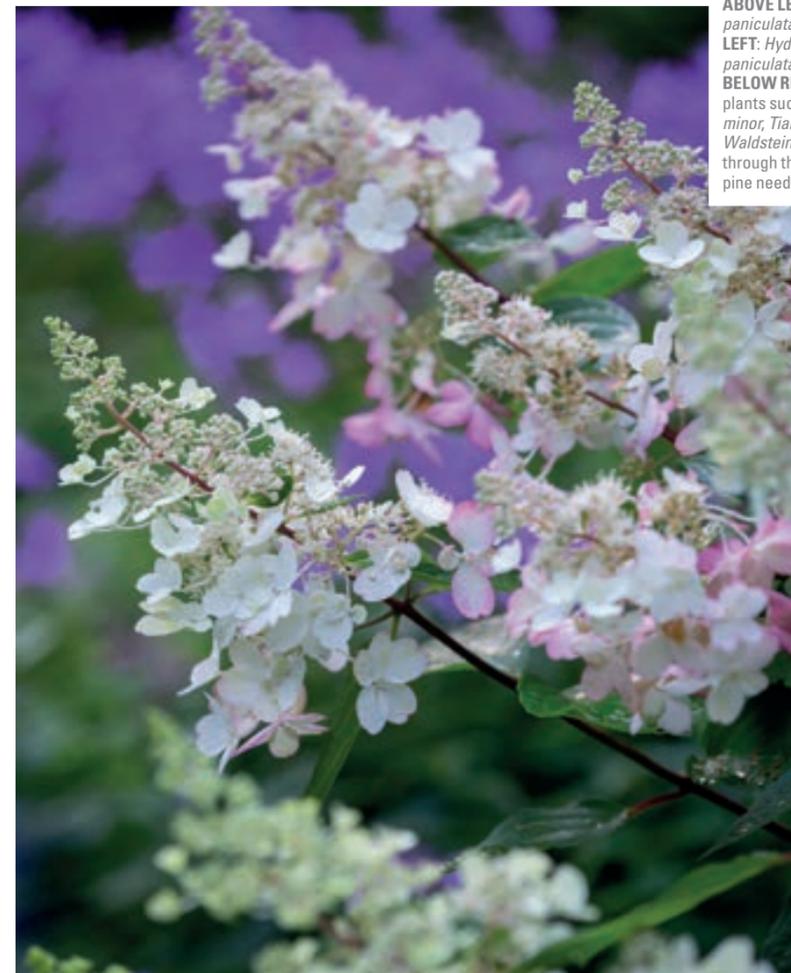
There was a poor selection of plants, which had been badly maintained, and some landscaping materials that were not well chosen. We retained the layout, reused what we could, and elevated the quality of the rest.'

Enchanting forest

Their client is a high-profile individual who had a particular fondness for her hideaway house in the woods, and a vision of how it could be improved. 'She is in love with decorative flowering plants and the English garden style,' Dmitry explains. 'She wanted flower beds filled with hydrangeas and roses that had decorative impact from early spring until late autumn. But she also wanted to preserve the forest as much as possible.'

Although there are neighbouring houses tucked away in the wider forest, the hectare of garden and woodland has a fairytale atmosphere that Dmitry and Yuri were keen to enhance. 'Originally, nothing really grew in the pine needles that carpet parts of the forest, but there was a wonderful feeling of being totally immersed in nature. We used resilient plants that would give the effect of a heightened natural forest floor – carpeting plants such as *Vinca minor*, *Galium odoratum*, *Tiarella*, *Waldsteinia* and *Pachysandra*,' says Yuri.

The huge pines come very close to the house, which must have presented significant →



ABOVE LEFT: *Hydrangea paniculata* BOBO; BELOW LEFT: *Hydrangea paniculata* 'Unique'. BELOW RIGHT: resilient plants such as *Vinca minor*, *Tiarella* and *Waldsteinia* now grow through the carpets of pine needles.



challenges when the building was being constructed, but now they contribute to the other-worldly atmosphere. 'We tried to make the forest and the ornamental garden merge,' says Yuri. *Hydrangea anomala* subsp. *petiolaris* is grown near the house and also out in the woods, where it is encouraged to scramble up the tree trunks. Carpets of *Calluna vulgaris*, *Stephanandra incisa* 'Crispa' and *Viola odorata*, among other things, fringe the forest and flow onto a formal lawn next to the house.

Connecting with nature

'The lawn was an explicit request from our client,' says Dmitry. 'It can't really survive in this environment, so the turf is replaced every spring, but she feels it is important to have this English touch.'

The client also has a passion for rhododendrons, and the more colourful the better. Her favourites include *R. 'Catawbiense Grandiflorum'* and *R. 'Roseum Elegans'* but in Russia, these are too tender to survive the winter. 'She likes everything to look perfect all year round so we made wooden tent frames which we cover with spruce branches and set over each rhododendron in winter. The structures look very charming and thanks to this winter protection, her rhododendrons grow at least six and a half feet, which is a tremendous size in this climate,' says Dmitry.

The extreme temperatures, which can fall to -30°C , have influenced every aspect of the design, including the choice of landscaping materials. 'Russian winters are harsh. We use a lot of tough, local Karelian granite for the paths, but the base layer has to be extremely solid as well, which makes construction expensive,' says Dmitry.

These paths wind away from the house on various trails through the woods, leading to a small vegetable garden, gymnasium, sauna, pavilion and naturalistic pond.

'The pond originally looked very artificial, edged with highly ornamental cultivated plants which jarred with the woodland setting,' says Dmitry. 'We changed its size, shape and planting – everything except the location.' Now, *Picea abies*, *Juniperus communis* 'Repanda' and *Juniperus communis* 'Green Carpet' have been threaded through the native trees and the pool, with its soft lines, gentle waterfall and sympathetic planting of *Iris sibirica*, *Butomus umbellatus*, *Juncus* and *Sagittaria*, is a favourite year-round destination for their client.

'She will come and sit here, even in the snow,' says Dmitry. 'In Russia, the dacha is a place to escape the city and connect with nature, to restore spirit and health,' he adds. 'I think this is what we have given her.' ◯

MOX Landscape Architects, mox.ru

ABOVE: tough, local Karelian granite laid on a solid base layer is used for the paths, some of which lead through the trees, past plantings of *Calluna vulgaris*, *Stephanandra incisa* and *Viola odorata* that help blur the boundary between garden and forest.