

Photo Story

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New peasants: locals caring for a city meadow, and the haymaking holiday

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There are 3 hectares in Moscow, 7 kilometres away from the Kremlin, that are now known as the Cherished Meadow. This plot used to house car sheds, but after they were pulled down a few years ago, the natural growth and wildlife began to slowly take over. A discussion started among the district residents about what the place should be like—whether it should become a car park, an entertainment park, or be converted into a space sustaining biodiversity. As a result, more than 3,000 people voted in favour of creating a “refugium” for Moscow’s flora and fauna on the plot. An interdisciplinary team of biologists and architects, including those from the Institutes of the Russian Academy of Science and Moscow Institute of Architecture, then proposed that the territory should have its own development project - the city’s very own Cherished Meadow.

That place is cared for by the locals, as, officially, the plot is ‘no-man’s-land’. The city is keeping it in reserve for road widening or another use that may be required in the future. So, to prolong community interest in the meadow, the Cherished Meadow team has developed associated environmental activities, such as undertaking joint cleanups of the territory and botanical and zoological guided tours. The pinnacle of the creative approach to caring for the former barren land was a haymaking holiday that took place in the meadow this autumn.

The idea of haymaking was, on the one hand, an allusion to the harvest holiday in Rus’ (the state that existed in the Eastern European territory until the late 17th century) that used to take place in rural areas and, on the other hand, to the modern experience of some countries, such as Poland, that is actively restoring meadows in their cities. As we discovered, scythes are extensively used in Warsaw to cut the grass: the method by which the stems are kept intact and the appropriate height of certain plants is main-

tained. Nevertheless, the grass is cut all over the meadow in mid-summer and in autumn. This helps the meadow to flower for the second time, but many insects perish – for example bumblebees that collect nectar from the flowering plants or butterflies whose caterpillars and pupa (chrysalis) normally stay in the grass until the following year.

With the Cherished Meadow, we decided to try mosaic cutting in strips of 4–5 m width and equally distanced from each other. Such a small mosaic pattern, on the one hand, prevents young trees from taking over the meadow and, on the other hand, ensures that no special habitat is removed by mowing and no overwintering insect species is lost. On this occasion, we chose an experimental plot of 100x20 meters, but in the future, the basic treatment regime will consist of mowing 30% or 50% of the meadow territory in strips, with an annual rotation of the processed area. The next summer will be the first one when we will be able to evaluate the results of the experiment.

To attract more attention to this environmental initiative, the works in the meadow were promoted as “revisiting the roots.” Over 50 people answered the call posted on the Cherished Meadow Facebook page for people to come and enjoy the haymaking holiday in the meadow, to find scythes, and to wear elements of traditional Russian clothing. Two people came carrying scythes, two brought rakes, and one even provided a gigantic 36-litre (!) *samovar*. The locals found professional musicians with a *balalaika* who sang *chastushkas* (a traditional type of short Russian humorous folk song with high beat frequency). Those involved also made hay dolls and commissioned professional architects to construct an enormous effigy using cut grass. A separate spot was chosen as a compost heap, and the hay was taken there when the event was drawing to a close.



The meadow is situated not far from Moscow city centre and consists of a narrow strip of grassland between houses. September 2020. Photo: T. Levchenko.



Since 2017, over 500 animal, plant, and mushroom species have been observed in the meadow. Meadow in July. Photo: A. Denisov.



Photo by AlexD3D

During lockdown periods, district residents were enjoying local plants more often than usual — for many, the meadow next to their house became the only opportunity to access nature. Thus, parallel paths at a social distance of 1.5–2.0 meters from each other, have developed within the meadow. July 2020. Photo: A. Denisov.



The meadow is home to over 300 animal species. The image shows a specimen of Common Blue (*Polyommatus icarus*). Photo: T. Levchenko.



The meadow now supports 19 species from the Moscow Red List (according to the decree by the city government dated 2019). The image shows a specimen of the long-winged conehead (*Conocephalus discolor*). Photo: A. Denisov.



For the haymaking holiday, district residents agreed to wear traditional outfits or Russian clothing accessories. The scythe was bought in an online shop. Photo: B. Maksimov.



The grass-cutting was zealous and socially distanced. On the left is Nadezhda Kiyatkina, one of the haymaking holiday organizers and the Cherished Meadow project coordinator. Photo: A. Kiyatkin.



When Alexander Rappoport, the Moscow State University Botanical Garden deputy director (left), brought a *samovar*, the work got even merrier. Photo: A. Denisov.



The locals found professional musicians with a *balalaika* who sang *chastushkas*. Even the Desposito song was played on that very *balalaika*. Photo: A. Denisov.



Dmitry (and birchen *lapti* on his neck) and Assya, local residents who have recently moved to a house nearby. Assya: "I've been longing to do something like that with my neighbours for so long!". Photo: A. Denisov.



The work gets done more quickly when accompanied by a *balalaika*. Photo: A. Pishchalnikov.



Strips of 3–4 meters were left untouched. The five-leaved ivy creeping over the meadow was removed by hand. Photo: L. Volkova.



The five-leaved ivy on the fence turned out to be a real challenge for those who were cutting the grass. Tall grass concealed the amount of ivy that had managed to creep into the meadow! The cut ivy vines were arranged in a separate heap to be disposed of later. The image shows Liudmila Volkova, a scientific researcher at the Institute of Ecology and Evolution of the Russian Academy of Sciences and the Moscow Red Book editor. Photo: A. Pishchalnikov.



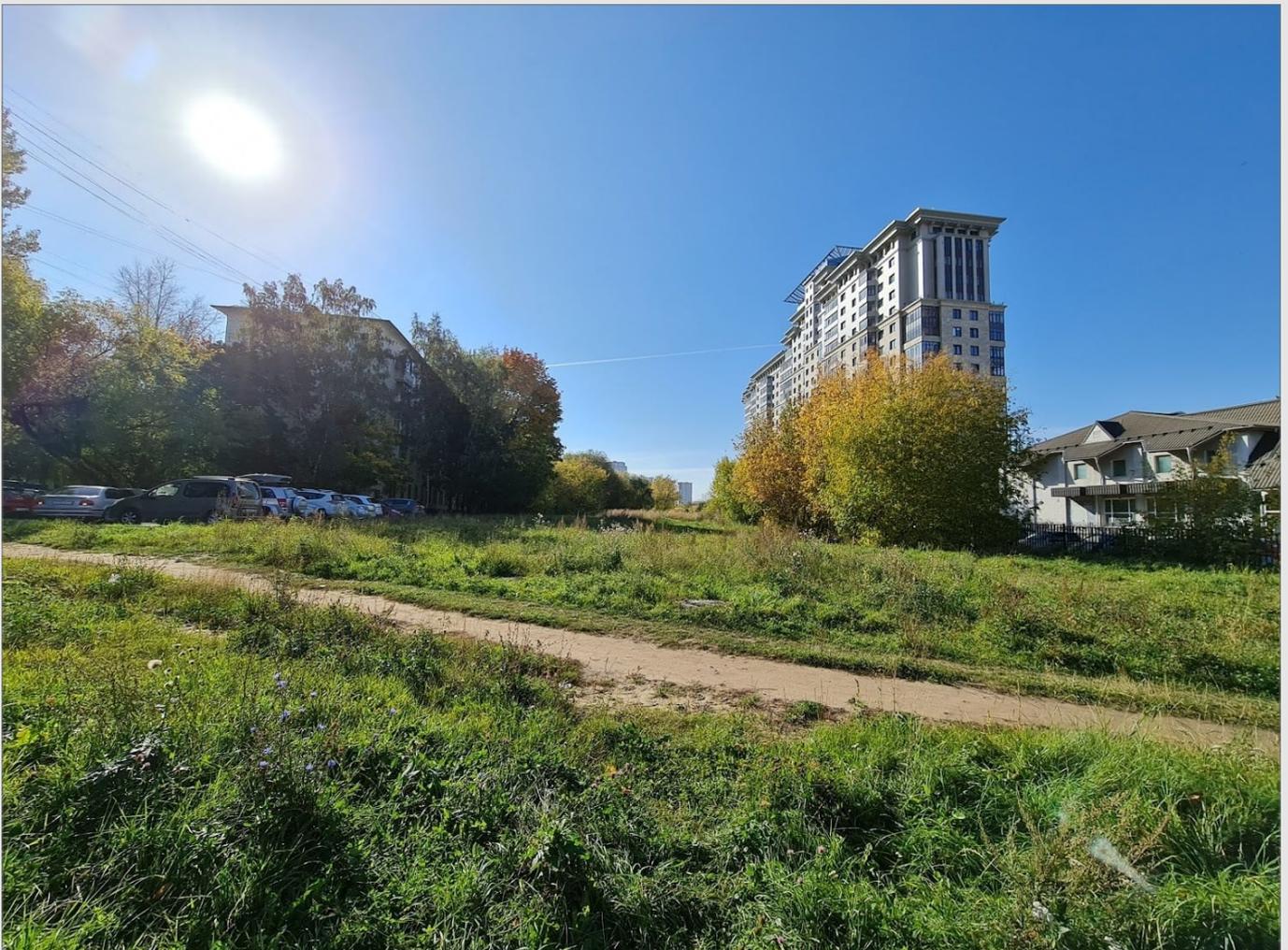
Anna Antokhina, the Cherished Meadow architect, assisted by family and neighbors, is using hay to construct an enormous effigy. Photo: N. Kiyatkina.



A gaily decorated festival hay centerpiece amongst those celebrating. Photo: A. Pishchalnikov.



Tiny dolls can be woven with hay and decorated with lace. Photo: N. Kiyatkina.



The meadow is easy to pass by unnoticed. To a stranger's eye, it is nothing more than a small overgrown strip of land, and passers-by don't realise how much fun (and beauty) they are missing. Photo: A. Pishchalnikov.