

Anton Chekhov

Chekhov's green fingers beyond the cherry orchard

The Russian playwright's appreciation of the natural and medical worlds has inspired a series of 'healing' spaces



Anton Chekhov in a garden in the Russian Crimea, c1900 © Fine Art Images/Heritage Images/Getty Images

Marianna Hunt SEPTEMBER 14 2018

“I think that if I wasn't a writer, I could be a gardener,” wrote Anton Chekhov in a letter to journalist Mikhail Menshikov in 1900.

We all know Chekhov the playwright, some are familiar with his work as a doctor, but few of us think of him as a gardener. Aside from his plays and short stories, Chekhov left a treasured notebook in which he painstakingly documented the names of every one of the 159 different species that he planted in his garden. According to his biographer and translator Rosamund Bartlett, the Russian writer's happiest hours “were spent tending his roses and poring over seed catalogues”.

Once it became clear that his tuberculosis was terminal, Chekhov's devotion to his garden reached almost obsessive levels. Every day he would head outside, tools in hand, until his illness prevented him being able to bend down to prune. His appreciation of the natural world permeates his writing, from the moving descriptions of boundless plains and lilac hills in his 1887 short story "The Steppe" to a family's desperate attempts to save their beloved fruit trees from the axe in *The Cherry Orchard* (1904).



Straw rick with Chekhov's table at this year's Hampton Court Palace Flower Show © Rory Carnegie



Pale yellow alcea (hollyhocks) © Rory Carnegie

In 2008, Bartlett established the Anton Chekhov Foundation, a UK-registered charity devoted to continuing the writer's humanitarian legacy. Inspired by Chekhov's passion, the foundation is planning to create a series of gardens across the UK, Russia and the Ukraine as part of a project called Anton Chekhov's Garden. They hope to cultivate environments where people receiving medical care and those providing that care can enjoy the peace and recuperation that green spaces offer. The first of the Chekhov "healing gardens" was launched as a show garden at this year's Hampton Court Palace Flower Show, where it won a silver medal. The same garden has now been moved to the Culm Valley Integrated Centre for Health, a general practice in Devon, where it will open to patients and the public on September 15.

The garden in Devon is a nod to Chekhov's talents as a doctor as well as a writer and plantsman. According to its designers, Anna Benn and Hannah Gardner, the garden is styled after Melikhovo, a 600-acre country estate where from 1892 to 1899 Chekhov treated his patients and in 1895 he penned *The Seagull*. "We shaped the garden into a hexagon with a replica of Chekhov's table at the centre. Sitting there you really feel as though you're gazing out across an entire estate," says Benn. "It seemed only right to make the garden an orchard," she adds. "The trees and flowers that we planted recreate the view that Chekhov used to admire from his wooden veranda."

In the tradition of a typical Russian dacha, the garden is also to be used to grow vegetables (including Russian cucumbers) and herbs to provide natural remedies for the health centre, just as Chekhov did for his own patients, to complement conventional treatments. Gardner describes the research she and Benn conducted into Russian herbalism before planting: "All the herbs have medicinal uses — thyme helps with coughs, rosemary improves your memory and wild carrot has long been used in Russia to treat kidney disease. Chekhov was well aware of all of this."



Phlox 'Natascha' with sanguisorba officinalis © Rory Carnegie



Digitalis ferruginea (rusty foxglove) © Jim Powell

Dr Michael Dixon, a senior partner at the Culm Valley surgery, believes strongly in the importance of socially prescribing both gardening and the arts. “They are two of the best and most effective alternatives to medicine,” he says.

“Hospital gardens used to be an important part of our healthcare culture. But that’s something we’ve lost,” Dixon explains. “They provided wonderful food and a space to relax. Now all we have are grey buildings and fast food.” The Culm Valley centre has been described by the Chief Inspector of General Practice as one the most innovative surgeries in the UK. In addition to his work as a GP, Dixon is a keen gardener.

Chekhov's own views on the importance of natural spaces in medicine appear in the opening paragraph of his 1892 short story "Ward No. 6", a tale that Vladimir Lenin claimed made him a revolutionary. The grim asylum that provides the story's setting is separated from the open fields by a grey fence, punctured with pointed nails: "These nails, with their sharp ends facing upwards, the fence, and the building itself, have that particular despondent and cursed look only to be found in our hospital and prison buildings." With the gardens project, Benn and Gardner hope to paint a very different picture.

antonchekhovfoundation.org

Follow [@FTProperty](#) on Twitter to find out about our latest stories first.

Subscribe to [FT Life](#) on YouTube for the latest FT Weekend videos

[Copyright](#) The Financial Times Limited 2020. All rights reserved.