

Squandering Our Genetic Heritage

Russian court jeopardizes historic seed bank -- and our ability to adapt to climate change.

By [David Bollier](#)



Seeds, from the [Food Democracy Now website](#).

The Pavlovsk Experimental Station near St. Petersburg, Russia, is considered a priceless repository of agricultural biodiversity. An estimated 90 percent of its seed varieties are not found anywhere else on the planet — more than 5,000 rare varieties of fruits and berries from dozens of countries. The seeds are irreplaceable jewels of genetic history that could be vital in developing new plant varieties as climate change threatens existing varieties of plants.

But soon, if a Russian court ruling is allowed to stand, the land now occupied by the seed bank could be turned into... a privately owned housing development. The seeds could be destroyed, and the consequences for the world's agricultural diversity could be devastating.

According to Food Democracy Now:

“Scientists around the world are calling the decision an assault against biodiversity and the memory of the bitter struggle that kept this renowned seed bank alive during the darkest days of World War II. Founded in 1926 by Russian agricultural scientist Nikolai Vavilov, the Pavlovsk Experimental Station, became an icon of human perseverance when 12 Soviet scientists made a stand, choosing to starve to death rather than eat the precious seed and plant collection as Nazi soldiers killed more than 1.5 million Russian soldiers and citizens during the grueling 900-day siege of Leningrad between 1941 and 1943.”

One reason that the seed bank is so vulnerable is that most of the rare seeds are planted in the ground; moving them could take many years and could easily destroy much of the collection. Yet losing the genetic history contained in the seed bank could essentially eliminate one of the most important tools that scientists have in combating climate change. As recounted in [The Guardian](#):

“In what appears Kafkaesque logic, the property developers argue that because the station contains a “priceless collection”, no monetary value can be assigned to it and so it is worthless. In another nod to Kafka, the government’s federal fund of residential real estate development has argued that the collection was never registered and thus does not officially exist.

“It is a bitter irony that the single most deliberately destructive act against crop diversity could be about to happen in the country that invented the modern seed bank,” said Cary Fowler, of the Global

Crop Diversity Trust. "Russia taught the world about the importance of crop collections for the future of agriculture. A decision to destroy Pavlovsk would forever tarnish a cause that generations of Russian plant scientists have lived and, quite literally, died, to protect."

The Russian court's ruling has been appealed to the Supreme Arbitration Court of Russia, but scientists and others are now mobilizing a protest against the possible destruction of the Pavlovsk Experimental Station, of the Vavilov Institute of Plant Industry. To register your own protest, you can visit the [Food Democracy Now website](#). For more information, visit the [Pavlovsk Experiment Station website](#) and [Discover Magazine](#).

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