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Plant Repository at Risk in Russia

By [ELISABETH ROSENTHAL](#)

The world's largest collection of European fruits and berries — at the Pavlovsk Research Station outside St. Petersburg, Russia — is at risk of being plowed over so developers can build homes there, international environmental groups say.

The collection, now comprising more than 5,000 fruit samples, was established in 1926 as a repository for crop diversity. Run by the [N.I. Vavilov Research Institute of Plant Industry](#), the collection is effectively a field-based gene bank and cannot be readily moved.

G. Paul Burnett/
The New York Times

Scientists say that maintaining samples of many types of plants is important for food security because their genes can be used to breed new variants. That is particularly important in view of global climate change, as the world may need food plants that are better able to tolerate a warmer, drier climate, for example.

Cary Fowler of the [Global Crop Diversity Trust](#) called the Russian plan to plow over Pavlovsk's fields the "most deliberately destructive act against crop diversity, at least in my lifetime."

The trust says that 90 percent of the plants maintained at the Pavlovsk station do not exist anywhere else in the world.

Late last year, despite the protests of Russian scientists, the Russian Ministry of Economic Development [revoked](#) the Vavilov Research Institute's rights to two parcels of land, transferring control to the Federal Fund of Real Estate Development, according to press material put out by the institute.

Next Wednesday, a Russian court is scheduled to rule on whether the development plan can go forward. Scientists in Russia and abroad have called on the nation's leaders to intervene. The director of the Pavlovsk station has said that bulldozers could be in the fields within three to four months if the court decision goes against him. And that, the trust says, would "destroy almost a century of work and an irreplaceable biological heritage."