

# Reaching for the sun

Tulsi Badrinath

Gardens provide great insights into their owner's priorities in life. This fact was made clear to me the day I climbed a mango tree in our garden. Swinging onto a branch that seemed strong enough, I held on to it in fright as it came away with an awful cracking sound from the main trunk and precipitated my descent to the ground. My fright was not so much about getting hurt but having to tell my mother that one branch of the *killimooku* tree now hung askew, greenish sap flowing from the spot where it was still, precariously, attached to the trunk. Dusting the mud off my frock, I ran to get her.

Exclaiming over the calamity, she mobilized the gardener, the driver, the cook and the peon to help her reposition the branch which was very gently bandaged with an old soft sari of hers. In the days that followed she would check several times as to how the injured branch was doing, but she never once asked me, her one and only eight-year child, if I had got hurt. I suppose I should be grateful that I didn't get walloped for hurting her beloved tree.

My grandmother's sprawling lawn in Delhi was put to various uses during the day. In the mornings, it resembled a dhobi's yard when saris were spread flat on the grass, all five yards gradually acquiring stiffness as the starch on them dried in the sun. On winter afternoons, lunch was served outside at a roughly hewn wooden table, and the meal acquired overtones of a picnic as one's back roasted in the sun. Late afternoons saw the lawn turn into a furniture polishing station when her carpenter laboured with sandpaper to burnish her artistic creations in wood. Early in the evening, I would find my grandmother sitting cross-legged there, surrounded by little

clumps of uprooted weeds, her fingers working through blades of grass even as my mother and she chatted over tea. At all times, the lawn provided me hours of play as a child, until one fatal day when I ran a lawn-mower over her favourite sari and was banished therefrom.

Back in Chennai, in the big garden where my mother spent many happy hours, she generously marked a small circle of earth that was mine, where I could grow anything I liked. I scattered some cucumber seeds, watered them some fifteen times a day, prancing about in anxious anticipation of the first tendril and couldn't understand my mother's amazement when the vine actually began to grow. Jade leaves sprouted, then flowers and finally a tiny cucumber took shape on the thriving plant. In time, on returning from school, I could choose a cucumber that would disappear into a sandwich. That was a high point in my life.

Not all seeds grew tamely into adulthood like the cucumber I planted. A pumpkin plant overgrew the boundary set for it and encroached upon our lawn. Within days it staked out its territory, creeping stealthily in all directions until all one could see were its star-pointed leaves and steadily advancing stalk obscuring the lawn. Who would have thought that a plant lacking the strength to grow upright in a respectable manner would be so tenacious in its attack? When the pumpkins appeared, round potent shapes that looked like bombs at night, it seemed as though the vine would surge up the walls of our house and reach for the sun next. At that point, my mother decided sadly to reclaim her lawn and fight the pumpkin's tyranny.

Some seeds seem to contain a furious generosity, producing crop after bounteous crop that exhaust one's resources of

distribution. An unremarkable sapling bought at a nursery grew into a fragrant tree laden with enormous lemons. The tree seemed ecstatic with its surroundings and flourished to the point that its branches pressed shut an entire window and we were up to our ears in lemon juice. A particular drumstick tree bursts into action twice a year, and one has to visit long forgotten relatives, neighbours and make new friends if only to distribute its produce. Last year the mango trees hung low with luscious *banganapalli* and not all the pickles and sherbets made, and the dishes cooked and the eating of enormous quantities of fruit both ripe and raw helped finish them. This year my father had a great idea: he invited a bus-load of school children to help themselves to the mangoes, ensuring both that they got picked and distributed in one go.

It can happen that a particular plant or tree will usurp attention from the rest of the garden because there is something striking about them. A wood-apple tree was the focal point of a friend's garden and attracted many enquiries about its health because everyone wanted some of its delicious fruit. My mother became very ambitious once and tried to grow an alphonso in the alien environment of Chennai. The tree grew, fruit appeared, and I can tell you that they were the strangest alphonso I have ever eaten, they tasted nothing like those nourished by Ratnagiri soil and Konkani waters.

All sorts of people, known, unknown, take a proprietorial interest in one's garden. I used to wonder why I had so many neighbours wanting to visit the garden of a rented house I lived in until I discovered that there was a betel leaf creeper nestled in an innocuous corner. There was also a cluster of banana trees that never produced fruit thus making them perfect for other purposes. Trustees of a local temple celebrating a festival asked me if they could cart

away several of those to make decorations from. Just how they knew about those barren trees I will never know. One neighbour felt that she had permanent visiting rights and usually made her raids before dawn. Having watched a rose-bud swell in size, I woke early one morning dying to see the first blossom on the plant only to find a headless stalk; she had beaten me to it. If ever the desire for murder most foul rose in my heart it was then! And who has not been approached at least once by neighbours wanting mango leaves or neem or drumstick or curry leaves? Is there any point in saying 'No'?

All the gardens I've been privileged to know had the special quality of disorder in them, and this is what made them unique. Often, there seemed to be no particular reason why a tree or shrub was planted in a particular spot, such as the henna bush growing at the entrance to a friend's house, but rooted there it lent atmosphere to the entire place. A jasmine creeper set in the middle of another garden drew us children like a magnet into plucking its buds for garlands. Flowering plants set too near the road made them fair game for passers-by to lean over the wall and steal flowers for puja. Coconut trees grown near the boundary resulted in a rain of nuts as a dubious gift from the neighbour. That haphazard charm is lost when a garden is landscaped down to the very last pebble.

A friend of mine who has no green thumb methodically uprooted the garden inherited on her mother-in-law's death. She got the area landscaped, ensuring that it required minimal care from her. The result is a cold approximate of a garden that looks the same any time of the year, that is locked into its contours and denies the changing seasons their exuberant vitality.

I suppose I should be grateful that she, like I, still believes in the idea that a home and its garden are inseparable. I'm filled with

dismay when I see houses all over Chennai being pulled down, gardens decimated, and concrete sealing every square inch of the land. The story is the same everywhere: elderly parents find it difficult to manage spacious garden-homes without servants, and wishing to ensure an amicable division of their property between children, they convert their homes into several self-contained apartments. The neem tree opposite my house, whose spreading branches were axed to make space for one such apartment complex to flourish, has never regained its grandeur.

As real estate prices vault, the city is shorn of greenery and the sense of leisure that a garden affords. What it tells us about ourselves is disturbing. To my mind it reveals a shrinking inwards, a voluntary relinquishing of an invaluable dimension of life and an unconscious yielding to gross materiality. A wealth commonly available to anyone owning land in the city, the delight of watching plants grow, is paradoxically becoming something only the rich possess.