

A padlock achieves what politeness cannot

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Living in a house surrounded by trees, I tend to believe that their primary purpose is to shield me from the passers by. However, the onset of any festival proves me woefully wrong. Neighbours, strangers, arrive at the gate, revealing startlingly intimate knowledge about the plants in my garden.

Around Dussehra and Diwali, the most common request is for mango leaves. Needless to say, one cannot refuse but I do plead that the leaves are too high, out of reach. Undaunted, they ask for the hooked implement required, march to the backyard where it is stored, and if it turns out to be too short, they swarm up the tree to break large clusters of shining leaves. The only benefit to be gained is that a bunch is magnanimously handed over, stirring me into decorating the entrance.

One particularly intrepid group of men noticed a cluster of ‘male’ banana plants growing in a remote corner. Before I knew it, they had hacked down the tallest one, declaring that the long smooth stalk was perfect for the pith sculpture to grace the sanctum of a local temple.

At least they asked my permission; the flower thieves never do. They are to be seen at dawn, jauntily grabbing the red hibiscus and white champa that stray over aerial boundaries, well beyond compound walls. Creeping past houses, these innocuous looking men and women eye bursts of colour, the yellow of tavaetia, the pink of lilies. Soundlessly they enter gates, pluck the flowers in a jiffy and vanish. On a lucky day, the gentle thieves might chance upon a fragrant windfall of parijatak lying on the ground, white petals on orange stalks, and hurriedly scoop them into sari or dhoti folds. Some do come prepared with cloth bags and I often wonder how the gods can be pleased with these stolen offerings. Perhaps they appreciate the gleeful effort involved?

Neighbours also claim unlimited rights to one’s garden. No, it is not trespass; this is India. One particular lady, who lives next door, kept careful inventory of the produce of various trees. I only had to glance outside my window at various times of the day to see her traipsing through my garden. ‘You must harvest the coconuts,’ she would chastise me, ‘or they will dry up.’ ‘Tch, tch, you are wasting the drumstick’s leaves, soon they will no longer be tender.’ ‘Don’t you know how to cook these berries in tamarind sauce? Try it, they taste very good!’ Looking at the jasmine buds encircling

her stout bun, seized no doubt at dusk from my creeper, I realized it was pointless to protest.

Recently, I nurtured a rose plant in the hope that it would yield a wine-red blossom. The plant thrived, it sprouted leaves, thrust happy shoots into the air and one magical day, a tiny bud appeared. I watched over it like a mother snake. It grew, became plumper and bigger until there was the promise that it would bloom the next day. Rising early at dawn, I ran eagerly to the plant only to discover a bald stem shorn of its beauty.

My gates are now adorned with a heavy padlock and until such time the neighbour decides to hitch her sari up and climb the compound wall, I think I am safe.