

The story of Gurukula Botanical Sanctuary

by Supi Seshan, Director, Gurukula Botanical Sanctuary

And so it came to pass, that a young man from Berlin found himself in the deep forests of Kerala during the torrid summer of 1971. He was 23 years old. He carried with him a shoulder bag with one little notebook in it. He was barefoot. He wore a waistcoat but no shirt; and a lungi, a clean but faded piece of cloth tied sarong-like around his waist. He had walked and hitch-hiked his way south after six months on the beaches of Goa.

Wolfgang Dieter Theuerkauf was looking for a place where he could be alone and quiet. The woods were not appealing but they suited his purpose: dissolution, self-enquiry and surrender.

Seven years went by in contemplative retreat. Seven years of solitude. I touch upon it here to acknowledge the fact that the Sanctuary's beginning was so simple that looking back, it is simply unbelievable, let alone interesting or remarkable. It feels like a fairy tale. A person in solitude in a forest, chopping wood, carrying water, stoking fires, with no idea to "do" ecology is the starter material (or seed) for a botanical sanctuary specialising in restoring rainforest and conserving native plants, which by the year 2017 is one of the largest assemblages of native species for India, within India.

There are many accounts of "self-made" men and women; heroic, admirable, poignant stories of individuals who rose out of indigent poverty to redefine society. The Sanctuary's story is rooted in an



Wolfgang examining an epiphyte with Purvi Jain, a colleague at GBS in 2012

individual who allowed himself to be shaped by the beauty and the power of plants.

Switch forward a few decades. Since last writing for Rainforest Review, Wolfgang has passed away. He'd lived on this hill for 40 years, grown a family, a community, a refuge for seekers, students and marginalised people, a steady workplace for the needy, a centre for conservation, an infant forest, and a fabulous plant sanctuary. He never went back to Germany.

He also left behind a small and resolute team of plant protectors, mostly women, each one responsible for hundreds of species of native plants.

The story goes that Wolfgang's love (and consequent concern) for plants at the Gurukula Botanical Sanctuary started with a single orchid. It appeared suddenly, one day, out of the confusing disarray of the wet dark green woods. An *Aerides crispata* astride a rotten branch – a bizarre, strangely different life form, stiff and waxy, with silver stilted velamen and strap like leaves. It was something he'd never noticed before – this epiphytic being, adapted to a

soil-less world, living off of humid tropical air and leaf wash and decomposed bark dust. It captivated him. And magic-keed him forevermore into the secret garden of nature.

That was the beginning, when he knew and understood nothing about plants, the forest or ecology. Now, three decades later, Gurukula Botanical Sanctuary is home to nearly 600 species of orchids, over 2000 species in all, ranging from bryophytes and ferns, to orchids, impatiens and shrubs, trees, tubers and climbers. 63 acres are under our care. With the current land price at \$20,000 an acre, this is no small achievement. These 63 acres, full with myriad plant species are increasingly a refuge for wild animals too. There are elephants that wander through snacking at the bamboo rich stream, civet cats, Nilgiri langurs, the uncommon Nilgiri marten, over 20 species of frogs, 220 species of birds and many lizards, snakes and insects. It is clear that humans can assist nature, and that using a full spectrum of approaches is wise, yielding real benefits to all, and at different scales too.

We have learned about the ecology of the Western Ghats through intimate involvement with its myriad plants. Each one is specialized, with close affinities to specific conditions. By practicing the ancient art of cultivation, we have concerned ourselves with re-wilding species which are threatened by extinction, and in the process also nurtured habitats.

Now there are restoring areas (land left alone to recover to vegetation completely native to this place); there are rehabilitated areas (small areas with planted species growing into community, attaining resilience and diversity); there are areas under intensive cultivation; and nurseries, a bit like the intensive care units of hospitals.

Though there are now centres working on a similar range of issues, GBS remains unusual, in terms of both the diversity of native species and the numbers of each species propagated. Wild species are notoriously difficult to propagate in large numbers, yet that is



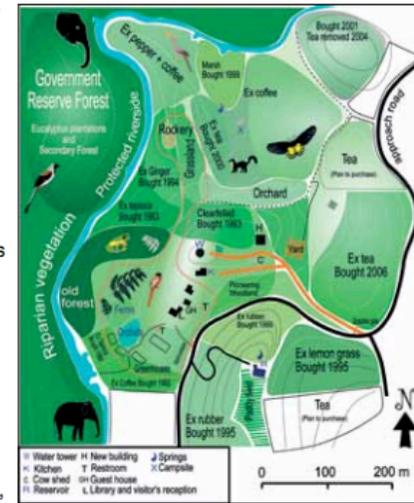
Supi Seshan at Gurukula Botanical Sanctuary

precisely what is needed for ensuring their survival.

This work requires an understanding of the complexity of the problem (habitat loss and degradation, and habitats altering, as well as habitats healing, and restoring); and of the diversity of techniques required, including detailed long-term observation, scientific knowledge, sound horticultural practice, rigorous experimentation, acting at different scales, from a single plant, to entire landscapes.

Under Wolfgang's guidance, our team developed a broad knowledge base of 100 plant families covering ecology, biogeography, taxonomy, plant pathology and horticulture. Primary to the whole process is the understanding that ex-situ conservation cannot be divorced from habitat protection. The principle is simple: plants require the forests, and forests require the plants. Where habitat protection has failed then the rescue and conservation of plants attains paramount urgency. Furthermore, ex-situ conservation can only work when rigorous standards of plant care and propagation and re-introduction are maintained. Data has to be maintained over a long period of time to observe how accessions, ecotypes and species behave in the wild, semi-wild or cultivated situations.

Rainforest Concern has been a steady champion of this tiny refuge in the mountains of southern India for 9 years. From irrigation equipment to land, materials for planting rare and endangered species, supporting the livelihoods of local women as well as restoration work in partnership with the state forest department and other NGOs, the help has been timely, vital, and encouraging.



In the last year we expanded the rockery, initiated a new grassland, multiplied hundreds of native species, liaised with taxonomists



Laily Doctor in the nursery

and conservationists, conducted search and rescue missions in the monsoon and played host to students from all over the region. While we miss our chief and founder very much, it's encouraging to see how his training continues to bear fruit, flower, spore, seed and community!

Thank you to Rainforest Concern for being part of this proliferation of life, and for sustaining this botanical sanctuary! Thank you Wolfgang!