

Green Phoenix: a gardener's guide to ecosystem restoration

I used to say I want to go to the Amazon before I die. Now I say I want to go to the Amazon before *she* dies.

I am indeed planning a trip to the Amazon. I have an invitation in fact, one that excites me and at the same time causes no end of trepidation. Hence this sharing. I want to discuss the matter with individuals who are concerned and experienced. It's a tricky topic and I need advice: lots of it.

I am part of a team specializing in a branch of restoration ecology called **ecosystem gardening**. We are a group of gardeners who have worked for 35 years in the rainforests of the Western Ghats of India, experimenting on how habitat and species can be nurtured back together to a state of health from conditions of total devastation. We have discovered ways of cooperating with the natural world so that human beings and wild species, as well as land, watersheds and forest cover can all benefit. It's an example of how a small part of the biosphere can be nurtured back. Our work has caught the attention of scientists and environmentalists in Brazil who want us to travel through the Amazon talking to people there about it. They say the situation there is desperate and that it's a case of "all hands on deck". Saving the Amazon is like saving your lungs from imminent collapse.

But you might ask, what does someone from the Western Ghats (a mere slip of a forest compared to the vast Amazon) have to offer? Nothing much, really. Just some tricks that every *maali* worth his or her salt in India or anywhere else in the world knows. We've given it a fancy name because **rainforest** gardening involves more complex tricks than regular roses-and-lawns sort of gardening. Like all gardeners we have a vision of paradise, but unlike most other gardeners we want it to be paradise for everyone, for all species including our own. Furthermore, we want to re-oxygenate the atmosphere, and trap horizontal rain (condensation from mist and cloud) to recharge the ground water. We also want to live in it and eat from it.

I haven't yet met a person who is *for* the felling of the Amazon, but I've met a lot of people who are ignorant about the absolute link between forests and climate and I've met more who feel helpless, hopeless and deeply daunted. I share this now to satisfy those of you who are simply dying to do something, anything. Gardening is beginning to submit to that uniquely satisfying kind of understanding where thought and constructive action flow into each other, but the news has been kept a secret, by an army that works under our noses every day: the gardeners.

Here I will only be able to point to a few things. For the garden-lover I hope to show that there is a world of ingenuity and craftsmanship with native species that far outshines the curiosities of exotic origins. For the environmentalist I hope to press home the point that building our corps with *maalis* is excellent ammunition with real positive benefits. For the poet, I can show how gardening is a tool to access the language between life, land, air and water and to directly participate. For the reader of popular news articles, I hope to present things that any farmer, gardener, aboriginal person could tell you: that the biota support the atmosphere; diversity equals health; that the death of trees, the rising temperatures, the proliferation of certain pestilential organisms are all connected. For those bored with all this, I hope to convey a small fraction of the grand intellectual excitement that underlies the daily work with ecology and of biodiversity. For my co-gardeners, naturalists and educators I hope to share yet another account of a humble response to the colossal and tragic business of ecological degradation, something pragmatic, doable and deeply rewarding.

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