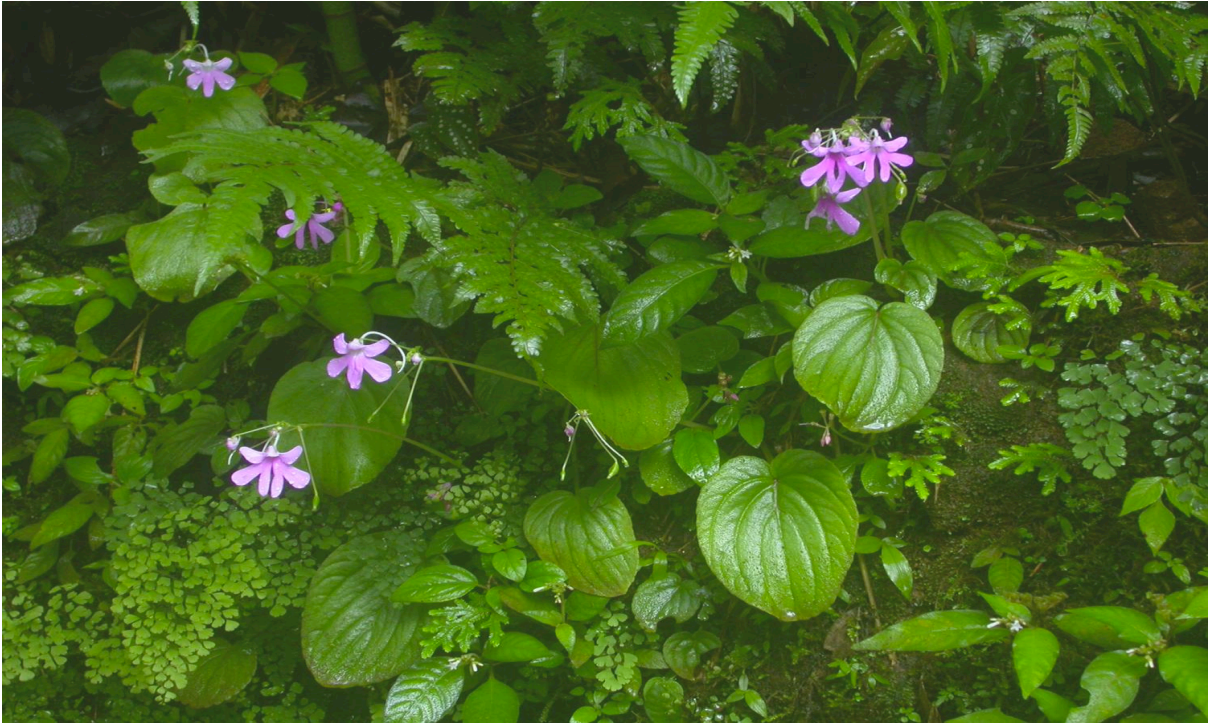


Dispatch from the Plant Underground

Dispatch 1: Touch the plants



Rockwall in GBS orchidarium with *Impatiens scapiflora*, ferns, lace ferns, mosses and other herbs.

19th July 2010

Dear friends,

This morning an idea was born in a greenhouse full of rare plants, a greenhouse in a garden at the edge of a forest in a biome that almost ceases to exist. The idea was simply this. To write a letter to all of you together. And to keep this letter going in the weeks to come.

Dispatches so to speak, from the plant underground!

300 of you are in this mailing. Soon there could be 700 or more by the time I collect all the emails of everyone we (at the Sanctuary) know personally, or have exchanged letters with. Some of you, of course, have been here!

A few of you may remember the old Sanctuary newsletter. That was a fun project and a great way to keep in touch with everyone known to us. Unfortunately, it was expensive to produce and required trips to the printer in Bangalore. We did the last one in 2006 when Stefi was here.

Some years later we started a blog. Unfortunately, uploading time for photographs was simply too long and internet connectivity was bad. It still is. (Bad.)

We thought today that letters (emails) may be a simpler way to communicate with all our friends scattered around the world. Many of you have asked for news. Many of you wonder what is going on here, what concerns us, how well the garden is growing, how the monsoon is, whether forests are increasing or decreasing, what you and everyone else can do for nature, whether we can grow this community across the world and so on.

I've been typically thinking of news in the form of articles on various topics such as: "the plants", or "the fish", or "thoughts on education", or "the politics of plant conservation". Somehow these don't show signs of happening. I find articles scary anyhow, they are so final, and you have only that one chance to say it all! A letter on the other hand feels less intimidating. It may also do better justice to the abundance of news that rushes around the place everyday all the time, between plants and plants, plants and animals, animals and humans, humans and plants, humans and humans, between all these and the wind, the rain, the fungal mat, the visitors in and visits out.

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For instance, here is today's topic of discussion. An old one for gardeners.

Plants in the greenhouses are too lanky. It is well known that plants in low light conditions grow long and weak. It is also well known that plants in exposed windblown places are tougher, stockier than individuals of the same species in a sheltered place.

Plants, it seems, like some action: they get stronger, stouter, healthier. They develop good form,

great character. They like the caress of the breeze, they like animals brushing by, they like fat raindrops bouncing off their leaves. In other words, plants, like babies and puppies (and adult humans!), love contact: they like to be touched.

There is a weird name for this. Thigmomorphogenesis. Thingummy what?
Thigmo....morpho....genesis. Touch....form....create.

While Wolfgang and other senior gardeners are experimenting with moving potted plants from the big greenhouses to temporary shelters out on the hillside for hardening, before planting them in the various habitats, I spent some time today indoors stroking the too lanky stems of ground orchids, and tickling some others with a feather. I believe this should be done twice a day to strengthen them. The Biology of Plants, an old and favourite text of ours, shows these grossly different sized plants from the effects of touching (or not). You can google thigmomorphogenesis and learn more if you like.

I was careful. I watched the movement of plants to the wind outside the greenhouse and tried to mimic that delicate bouncing-but-tremulous movement. It was great fun, I got to see a lot of detail. I also got a crick in the neck and a stiff back from bending over so much. I'm not sure what the plants felt. I think they enjoyed themselves, I hope they did. For it to really have an effect (for the thigmo-whateveresis) it needs to be done everyday, twice a day.

And then I played three strings on my favourite Am chord on the guitar-tanpura for fifteen minutes or so. I do feel they love these notes. Who doesn't?

Weird as that may seem, please note that it was a heavy rainfall day, and I was escaping from the big wet into a beautiful bright space full of amazing green beings, species of the genera: *Pachystoma*, *Habenaria*, *Ipsea*, *Platycerium*, *Didymocarpus*, *Cycas*, *Impatiens*, *Zamia*, *Tillandsia*, *Ceropegia*, *Begonia*, *Asplenium*, *Adiantum* and many more. A nice change from my desk and a damp dark workspace! I was joined by a dog named Polenta, two butterflies, several grasshoppers, an ant-mimicking spider. a hornet, a line of ants and a toad. Spiderhunters zitted by during the breaks in the rain. It poured while I was tickling the orchids.

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Oh, and there's another item of news that's circling the Sanctuary, the discovery of two wild boar nests out on the farther hillside. There are two large spindle-shaped grass mounds in a clearing, beautifully constructed from grass and other plant stalks. There is a hole at one end, and a really snug hollow inside. Sandy, Sruti, Anna and I went there two days ago, along with Tasha (Rottweiler) and Polenta (half Daschund), who immediately got in. Suresh says boars come there during the heavy rains, alone, in pairs or with their young. There are two of these boar thatch-igloos on that same hilltop. Sandy has never seen these or heard of these, and that says something, for Sandy has lived here all his life and knows a great deal about life on the land. Abhishek, who is also an amazing naturalist, has never seen one, and he has travelled in a lot of forests.

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Those of you who have never been to the Sanctuary, drop in on our website (see below) and find out what we are all about! In time, from these letters, I hope you'll figure out who's who and what's what.

Those of you who don't want to receive this, drop me a line and I'll take you off the mailing list!

Those of you who have questions or suggestions, or interesting information to add, please do write!

Those of you who know others who may like to hear from us, send me their email ids!

Best wishes

Suprabha

GBS website: www.gbsanctuary.org