

Dispatch from the Plant Underground

Dispatch 2: Monsoon tidbits

21 July, 2010



The forest near which we live

Hello everyone,

Thank you so much to all those friends who wrote in after getting the first dispatch! The response has been incredible! I've never received so many letters so quickly, it's really been quite wonderful to receive such encouragement.

Thigmomorphogenesis (or, as one friend referred to it: thigymorphing) seems to have touched many people. I must tell the plants. They'll be tickled to hear this!

I've just come in from the river, it's swollen, wild and brown. It's been raining a little more, and there've been some heavy short downpours and some brief gusts of wind. Sruti tells me we got 15 cms in the last two days. It's more than the previous days but still far short of classic monsoon

rain for July. I think last year at the same time we'd been cut off for several days when the river covered the Panamtara bridge. That's when Anna, Suma and I went swimming in the lake that formed in the Manisseri valley where the cows normally graze.

When I got back to my room, I peeled off my raingear, stepped out of the rubber boots, took the socks off, and lo and behold, there were dozens of tiny leeches. They were so small that I missed a lot of them until they filled up with blood a little later. I had one behind my ear, several on my neck, three in my navel and many more on upper arms, behind the knees and between the toes. I just went for a short walk! Imagine what happens to the others who work outdoors all day in the grassland, and the fields and so on! Imagine how many the dogs get!

Laly came rushing by to tell me something amazing just then. It seems that the experiment with germinating the *Pteris ottaria* spores, taken from a herbarium sample at Calicut University has worked, albeit just with one spore. This is now more than a year after we got the spores from a dried and pressed (dead) specimen from a cupboard in the herbarium of the Botany Department, a year of careful and patient observation from Laly, the very first set of leaves has emerged.

I'm not sure how many of you know about fern reproduction, I can tell you more later. But suffice it to say for now, that this is quite an outstanding achievement on Laly's part. We had first assumed *P. ottaria* to be a rare plant as we had never seen it anywhere in the wild. But botanists from Tropical Botanic Garden and Research Institute (TBGRI) tell us that they have seen wild populations of this fern species. The irony then, is that we took so much care to rescue spores from a dead plant, assuming that the species was nearly extinct.

Anyway, it's good news for the garden. The really amazing thing is that Laly can recognize the species at this stage, the leaf set is tiny, minuscule! To my eyes totally indistinguishable from any other baby fern sporophyte!!

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I couldn't send this mail last night, connectivity was terrible.

I've spent part of the morning tickling one set of plants in one greenhouse. I think for experimental reasons I have to be consistent and specific. So I chose my row of ground orchids and took my camera cleaning airbrush down and worked on half the orchid plants in each pot, on the left side only. I then watched the garden gang watering the potted *Impatiens* and orchids, and then Laly collecting seeds from *Impatiens latifolia* plants.

I talked to Laly about "thigy-morphing". She smiled knowingly, and then mentioned that she notices a difference between the plants she waters and those watered by the junior garden crew. She says, how you water makes a huge difference, how and with what attitude.

I decided to not tell Suma (who runs the orchidarium) which plants I was gently brushing. The test will be if she notices a change! Besides I need to first develop a routine around this!

For those of you who don't know, I'm kind of the clerk-behind-these-genius-gardeners. For those of you who don't know, not everyone in a botanic garden is a gardener. Here at the Sanctuary, some of us are cooks, some of us are educators, some of us are fixers and menders, some of us share administrative responsibilities (fundraising, auditing, public relations, correspondence etc). Most of us are multitaskers but the species garden in particular as well as the animals, the land, the vegetable garden and rice fields, require regular presence and observation, and good skills, all of which build with time.

For those of you who don't know, I'm using my time this year to learn more about the "big picture", about what's going on across the Western Ghats, and I'm now part of the core group of the Save the Western Ghats Movement. I'll tell you more about the mission of this group soon, it's really quite important. This means I travel a fair bit.

When I'm back at the Sanctuary I try to catch up with plants and animals and the river and the land. A lot of time just looking, walking, listening. And some writing!

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Sandy and Sora (from Japan) and Baby and a couple of others have built a fantastic bridge

across the river at the end of the Manisseri valley. This is now the second one to be made at this spot.

So I went with Tasha to check it out. I was quite astonished. It is strong, made of areca (betel nut palms) and bamboo. I can't quite figure out how they managed to lift it up. Sandy says it was really heavy and quite tricky. They used ropes and pulleys. Now six of our crew who come from one hamlet, can cross the river in the monsoon instead of having to take a long detour. Sandy says it was great fun making it. I believe him!

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A last note. I've been wondering about having a pdf version of this newsletter. With photographs. And maybe some of the replies. I can do this offline, it's easier than a blog. And I can upload it whenever connectivity is good. For those of you who don't want to read this every day, the pdf file may be better. It's also good for newcomers, to catch up with the different threads of thought. Also, it's not clear how often I'll be able to write this. For now, it's whenever inspiration strikes!

I'm attaching the first one for you, slightly edited. The design and title etc are temporary, maybe you have suggestions!

So, this is it for today. I see Purvy walking by with pots of annual *Impatiens*. I saw Suresh building a small wall when I came back from the bridge. I know Shailesh is weeding and manuring the bananas. Sandy is out there too, planting fruit trees. Rain doesn't stop gardeners! I'm sitting inside snug and dry with a steaming cup of tea, writing about all that to you!

Take care, all.

Best wishes

Suprabha

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I agree that we need to think of humans. I just don't want to think about the well-being of corporations and governments, who force so-called development in the name of the people. The well being of corporations negates the well being of humans.

Is there an alternative to modern industrial civilization? One we can find immediately? I vote for this.

An alternative that springs from the earth, from the living beings of the earth, from free forests, free rivers, free mountains, free oceans, free humans.

What will it take to bring all this back?

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On, this note: to sleep.

I started this dispatch in the night. I end it in the night, 48 hours later. Polenta (half-dachshund, barks). Crickets trill outside my room. I see the moon rise through the fluttering canopy.

I hear no sign of elephants. I hope they are well and safe.

I hope you too are well, and safe.

Until next time!

Best wishes

Suprabha