

Title How Green is My Garden?

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How green is my garden?

I live in a three-storeyed apartment in Richmond Town, not far from Lalbagh. Around my building are various trees like coconut, mango, jackfruit, pomelo and avocado. In season, a stately Akash Ganga drops its blossoms in the driveway.

The canopy

From my balcony I see a continuous canopy of mango and coconut, intertwined with the criss-crossing branches of a Singapore Cherry. There is always some movement in this canopy. Bees, butterflies and bats come to pollinate the flowers. Squirrels play in the branches. Ants walk over from the palm to nest in my flowerpots. Numerous birds visit to feed on flowers, fruit or insects. Green barbets hide in the foliage. Koels call out from the mango tree, and parakeets screech as they fly to the *champaka*. Flowerpeckers – among the tiniest of birds – flit in and out, and sunbirds glint in the sunlight. I saw a Greater Coucal show off its bronze wings, so close that it caught my breath. The most frequent visitors are the Red-whiskered Bulbuls, best seen in the evenings when they flock to the jackfruit tree.

Looking down from the terrace I see how the green canopy wraps around the neighbourhood, and begin to understand the ecosystem. An enormous Ficus at the back is laden with figs. I see the tops of large *Champakas* and Copper pods, a flare of orange in a Gul Mohar tree further out, and rain trees in the far distance.

At ground level

Splashes of colour in the garden come from ornamental plants – bright bougainvillea and hibiscus, roses and marigolds. The Peacock flower has butterflies flitting over it. Huge carpenter bees with iridescent wings dive into flowers looking for nectar. Weaver ants build their nests, while others forage in leaf litter. The pink ice-cream creeper runs riot in an open ground next door.

Walking down the street

Bungalow-gardens in the area have fruit-bearing trees like the jamun, guava, drumstick or banana. Peepul, neem, *champaka* and *kadipatta* have been planted for their sacred or medicinal properties. *Champakas* are fragrant; their nectar and fruit a magnet for birds.

As bungalows give way to apartments, the gardens get smaller. They have small ornamental trees like Plumerias, Bottlebrush, Angel's trumpet, even a Canon-ball tree. The flowers are showy, but provide no edible fruit.

Wider streets have the iconic rain trees, now synonymous with Bangalore. A number of such exotics were imported from South America, Africa, Java, Myanmar or Sri Lanka. They have become 'naturalised', and are an integral part of the city.

NATIVE OR INDIGENOUS: the ongoing debate

Like cosmopolitan Bangalore, its trees are also a mixed population. Sacred Plumeria and Canon-ball trees (*Nagalinga*) were originally from South America. Chikoos and papayas (*parangi hannu*) are also non-native. These 'exotics' have integrated into the ecological and cultural web.

Exotics like Yellow tabebuias, purple jacarandas, red Gul Mohars and the pink Cassia were planted to provide serial flowering in the city. Gustav Krumbiegel, a German horticulturist at Lalbagh, planned this in the 1900s. He chose rain trees for shade, and flowering trees for their colour and beauty. Harini Nagendra, an ecology professor, says that a single rain tree provides shade to a quarter acre under it. It is a refuge for birds and insects, and felling such a tree causes irreparable loss.

KEYSTONE SPECIES: Ficus

There is no doubt that indigenous trees like the Ficus are vital to ecosystems. They produce thousands of figs, and attract droves of insects, birds, bats and monkeys. As different trees fruit at different times, there are always some trees in fruit. Animals disperse the seeds, and propagate the species. Ficus is a 'keystone resource' that helps in expanding green cover and maintaining biodiversity.

CONCLUSION

The plants and trees in my neighbourhood are diverse, and sustain different life forms through the year. I have personally experienced how a loss in green cover has led to a loss in biodiversity. Monkeys that once feasted on jackfruit in our garden no longer visit, perhaps due to fragmentation of the green canopy. We need to be mindful about trees we cut or plant, as it disturbs the web of life around us.

"The real reason Bangalore earned its reputation of garden city was not so much its formal gardens as it was the number of trees on both public and private land. With its low bungalows set in large grounds and overhung by trees, and with its tree-lined roads, an aerial view of the city would have been one of tree canopies with very little building or road showing through. "

Laeq Futehally



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