ANNUAL REPORT

AUROVILLE BOTANICAL GARDENS

2016-17

Conserve and Celebrate

Biodiversity!
A WORD FROM THE GARDENS

Welcome to the first proper annual report of the Auroville Botanical gardens. We have existed for 17 years, emerging from the initial bare lands of our fifty acre plot, to grow into the gardens we are today.

So why now an annual report? Well we felt that we really have arrived as a garden and that many people are aware of some of the things that happen here, but not all of them, so here we have tried to capture the whole picture. Not the day to day events that we share in our newsletters, but the long term substance of the garden’s work.

These fall into three main categories, firstly the development of the gardens themselves, secondly the education activities and visits to the gardens and finally the projects that we work on outside of the gardens, which are our efforts to create ecologically sustainable landscapes in today’s world.

Our aim this coming year is to develop more events and activities at the gardens through out the year. Aside from creating enjoyable moments for ourselves we hope it will give people that little bit of extra motivation to come more often to the gardens, to spend time enjoying the beauty of the our environment and to learn a little more about the biodiversity of our planet.

I hope that you enjoy the report, and are inspired to visit us over the course of the next year, and if we are lucky you might decide to join in and get involved in some way with our work or come to one of our events.
A NEW PLACE FOR OUR EDUCATION PROGRAM

Every year more than 3,000 local schools students come to the gardens. We encourage their appreciation and sympathy for the local ecosystem through interactive and fun session. For each group we provide a simple healthy lunch, and the new kitchen will give us the opportunity to cook in more hygienic conditions. Thanks to SAIIER and the Government of India grant for funding this.

RENOVATION AROUND THE OFFICE BUILDING WITH ACCESSIBILITY RAMP

This year we have also worked on the surrounding of the main buildings, with the intention of creating easy access for physically challenge people. There is now ramp access to the main building, and a smooth path that links the new toilets in the kitchen building which are now accessible for all.

MINI PONDS
TO ENCOURAGE PEOPLE TO HAVE THEIR OWN OASIS!

There are new 5 small ponds in the ornamental pond. These have been built with the same concrete shuttering that we used when we upgraded our waste water treatment plant that is connected to the main buildings and new kitchen. The ponds have not only had an immediate effect on the wildlife around, which can now drink, freshen up and fish if they so desire! It has also helped us to develop the collection of water plants in the gardens, which we can take out in to the projects we work on. We are still building up our collection of day flowering lilies and other plants, so if anyone has anything unusual we would be very happy to add this to our collection.

CACTUS GROWING...
SPECTACULAR LANDSCAPING WITH ONLY FEW DROPS OF WATER

We finalized the entrance of the Cactus garden creating two new mounds which are home to a triad of rare Pachyderma plants and a new species of Baobab - Adansonia granddieri. We have also welcomed a refugee from the extension of the Auroville Bakery, a large tree cactus which seems to have recovered from the difficult transplantation. A little further in and to the north we have begun planting our collection of thorny tree acacia’s which are also highly adapted to low rainfall, in this group we have planted a rare red flowering acacia for which we are yet to get the correct scientific name.
EDUCATION PROGRAMS

This year our daily education programs covered 85 school visits with over 3,000 children. The age range of the children visiting was between 9 and 14 years old. We also organized cycle trips in the bioregion, overnight nature camps, teacher trainings, and visits for women’s groups. We received a grant from SAIIE for 60% of the expenses for which we are grateful, the balance amount came from the General Garden Fund, which is supported from the income generated by our commercial landscaping projects and nursery sales.

There were 3 publications from the gardens this year:

**Dye Colour** - which is an introduction to the Dyeing plants of Tamil Nadu and how to use them. It was the culmination of one of our volunteer’s 12 months program at the gardens, and is an accompaniment to the new colour garden that has been created to host the plants.

**Once Upon a Pond** - is a colouring book that we designed, drew and wrote here at the gardens. It is the story of a special frog, called Freddie, who is different from the other frogs, and what happens the day a large Heron arrives.

**The Botanical Gardens 2017** weekly page diary that showcased images from 12 areas of the gardens.

NURSERY

In our nursery this year we were able, thanks to the permanent staff and our numerous and ever changing volunteers to produce over 30,000 seedlings. Some of these went to the Forest Group to consolidate the plantation of native TDEF species within Auroville forest. The remaining species where either sold to our own landscaping and planting projects that are ongoing through out the south of India, or to interested parties that have already developed a sensitivity towards the need of planting native species.

We managed to have over 110 species of native plants in the nursery this year, a mix of trees, shrubs and climbers. We had a comparable number of other plant species that we have found useful in creating drought tolerant gardens.

This year we hope to have more pollinator friendly species as we see the need to promote the habitat for this important sub group of insects that include bees, butterflies and moths.
This project began in March 2011 with the first site visit, an empty, flat undefined plot of 27 acres on the edge of the Kaluveli wetlands – a vast 75 sq km floodplain that drains out to the sea in the north. It is a project in which the landscape came first and the resort followed on once the basic landscape concept had been formed.

Today the resort has already functioned as a wedding venue, and soon the entire complex will be open. The landscape is based on the ecology of this area and contains many unique tree species of the area, which along with the perennial water-bodies are providing perfect habits for the local and migratory water-birds.

It has not be an easy project as the site conditions provided many challenges. It is a very alkali soil, and there is a high salt content in the ground water. In the summer the hot, dry winds race across from the west grasping any moisture that they can extract from the ground or the plant themselves. In addition to these factors have also had our far share of unusual climatic events such as two weeks of flooding from the unprecedented rains in 2015.

I am quite sure that the only reason the landscape looks as lush and interesting as it does today, is that we have drawn heavily on our experience of native species that are adapted to these extreme conditions. It is a great example of how we can create unique and beautiful landscapes that not only please the human eye, but that also provide interesting habitat for the local bird and insect populations.
Ashok Leyland Factory in Chennai

This project, running for the past year, is an amazing opportunity to create ecologically sound landscapes across the 160 acres of their research and development center in the north of Chennai. We are currently working in 3 areas of the campus covering around 35 acres, creating native forest and thematic gardens around newly formed perennial water-bodies.

Zoho Campus in Chennai

We have designed a full landscape master-plan for this software company on their 35 acres campus in south Chennai. Some work on the ground has begun with the creation of shaded walkway linking the existing buildings on the site. Rocks, benches and small ponds have been installed for the employees to enjoy as they move between areas or just to take a short break between work sessions.

Ramco Quarry Restoration

This year 3 pilot projects were initiated to restore worked out limestone quarries in two locations. We have used over 60 native species on the project areas that cover around 10 acres. We are hoping that over the next years these projects will scale up in size as the potential for creating forests are enormous, even though the actual site conditions are very challenging.
ECOLOGY OF THE HILLS

We currently have 3 projects at various stages up in the hills, a 45 acres site in Ooty, a 10 acres resort in Coorg and a smaller one in Yercaud. In all of these projects we are studying the local forests to extend our knowledge and work with our principle of using native species within the landscapes.

Our long term vision with all of these projects is to create a network of resorts that have a deep understanding of their local ecology, that are linked through our plant identification website – www.plantekey.com (see back page for details). This syncs with our aim of deepening people’s relationships with nature and creating portals for people to learn and understand the value of plants in a variety of locations.

These are great examples of how commercial ventures can see the potential benefits of working with sustainable landscaping. We are not only concerned with creating beautiful spaces which benefit biodiversity, but we are also giving the guests at the resorts a deeper and more meaningful recreational experience, that will ensure they return again and again to the resorts to see how the nature is developing and benefiting.
WHAT NEXT?

A SMALL OASIS WITHIN THE ARBORETUM

We have begun work on the central water-body of the gardens, which has been planned for many years. It’s not huge, covering around 260 sqm, but it will hopefully be big enough to become home to Victoria amazonica the iconic water lily that has enormous floating leaves. Along the margins of the pond will be our collection of native water grasses, sedges and reeds. This will become a new focus for visitors in the early evenings, as it will be next to the children playground, another development we hope to find the funds for this year.

A GARDEN OF INDIAN CULTURE

Relationships with plants are at the heart of many aspects of Indian culture, and we are in the planning stages of creating a garden that introduces visitors to the species that are associated with a variety of India’s sacred traditions. Astrological significances, planetary connections, stalwarts of the ayurvedic and siddha preparations and of course plants that have special significance for the gods and in pujas, will be represented in the garden that will take the visitor on a path of discovery.

EVENING STAGE

Now that the gardens are really taking shape and developing, we are going to devote more energy to hosting small cultural events in the late afternoon and early evening. The intention is to draw more people into the gardens by giving them an extra reason to come by in the late afternoon, and for this reason we have created a small stage next to the main building. We will start with a monthly program of music, poetry or small theatre performance, that will be linked to seasonal events in the gardens, perhaps the summer flowering of the trees, the return of the migrant birds or simply the rich lush greens of monsoon.

A JAPANESE TOUCH

Jyoti, aurovilian artist, with the help of Noël has designed a Japanese Garden with a Pavilion of Silent Reflection at the centre. It will bring the quality of Beauty and Harmony into our Botanical Garden. It will be a place where people will be inspired by the harmony of nature and Spirit that Japanese gardens are famous for, while also providing the opportunity for children and others in India
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