

A Noah's Ark for plants

Wayanad is a popular holiday destination in the mountain ranges of the Western Ghats in the southern Indian state of Kerala. There, decades ago, a young dropout from Berlin founded a project for plants threatened with extinction.

By Elisabeth Voß

The bus from Thalassery to the highlands of the Ghats takes me through small villages and magnificent views of deciduous and palm forests, tea plantations and mountain peaks. I travel the last kilometres from Peria with a tuk-tuk – a three-wheeled auto rickshaw, which probably owes its name to the rattling noise it produces. The rickshaw struggles to climb up the steep road and stops at a driveway. I get off and find myself at the gate of “Gurukula Botanical Sanctuary”. Far and wide there is no one to be seen. I enter and walk towards the main house, crossing a square with a large stone grave, abundantly planted like a raised bed. Wolfgang Theuerkauf from Berlin, the founder of the project, died in November 2014 and was buried here, at the entrance of his life's work. Birds are chirping and I hear dogs barking in the distance. I spot exotic flowers and plants – some of them I have seen in flower shops in Germany, but here they are much larger and more powerful. Some have leaves that are larger than me, and seem to be standing next to each other as in a meeting or at a reception, quiet and graceful. When a young woman comes out of the house, I ask for Suprabha Seshan who will show me around the project in the next few days.

Gurukula means "family of the guru", whereby in India a guru is simply a teacher. Here nature is the teacher, and Gurukula Botanical Sanctuary sees itself as a community of people, animals and plants, in which all living beings are sacred. The focus, however, are the plants. So they say on the website of the project: “The plants work harder than the mightiest governments on Earth. They give us free food and water. Think of it, we are the only ones who pay for food and water. Everyone else gets it for free. They are laughing at us as we slave our way to live, when they are continually filling the earth with life and love and water and beauty. Whom shall we serve? Plants or machines? The plants of the Sanctuary say, 'Join us!'”

Wolfgang Theuerkauf came from the Berlin hippie and communes scene. Like many other seekers he travelled through Nepal and India during the mid-1960s, returned briefly to Berlin, and left his hometown for good around 1969. In Kerala he met Nataraja Guru, an intellectual mental and spiritual teacher with social reform ideas, and joined his ashram. When in the course of a land reform Nataraja was donated a piece of forest, he asked Wolfgang to go there and take care of it. The young man from Berlin lived there in solitude for several years. He then married an India woman, Leelamma, and they had two children, Sandilya and Anna. When his German passport had expired, he managed to obtain Indian citizenship – mainly because he mastered the local language Malayalam. With the support of his relatives in Germany, he purchased a piece of land in 1981 and tried his hand at growing vegetables to feed his family. For many years they lived very simply, without electricity or telephone. Every day Wolfgang went to fetch water from the river below the land.

Plants are the basis of all life

In their surroundings more and more rainforest was cleared for tea plantations. Wolfgang developed a vision to protect the forest and the endangered plants and to help them spread again. He saw plants as the basis of all life – without them neither animals nor humans can exist. Therefore he started rescuing plants by planting them on his land and multiplying them. Wolfgang's deep love of flora sparked a great thirst for knowledge in him, and he began to undertake research, accompanied botanical excursions, read scientific works, visited universities and exchanged ideas with experts. Gradually, he became a recognized expert. His brother Thomas tells me that the botanical garden of Leiden University in The Netherlands once addressed Wolfgang in a letter as "doctor". When he replied modestly that he does not wish to be addressed that way, they apologized and corrected the salutation to "professor" –

apparently they could not imagine that anybody could have gained such knowledge through autodidactic learning.

The project area grew and more people joined. Today Gurukula Botanical Sanctuary covers more than 25 hectares. The largest part is rain forest, which is left to regenerate itself. Rare and endangered endemic plants are cultivated and propagated in a nursery and a garden, to then be brought back into the wild or nature reserves. For educational purposes there are a few plants from different countries. A small farm is used for partial self-sufficiency. Until his death, Wolfgang was the one who had the final say in all decision-makings. "He was a patriarch", his brother says. He stretches however that one aspect therein was Wolfgang's concern about the safety of those working at the Sanctuary or visiting it – such a place in the wild is not without danger. The steps on the land have to be maintained so that no one stumbles and falls; there are scorpions and poisonous snakes. "Wolfgang loved them", Suprabha says: "He would insist to anyone who was frightened by them, that we must learn to live with them, and in fact he protected snakes from humans! He saw the wild as a friendly place, and urban areas as dangerous! For him the wild was his family, and we all learned to live with the wild as our family." In the early days Wolfgang had once carried a fallen tree from the riverbank and chopped it for firewood. He fell seriously ill thereupon, because the tree was poisonous, which is why the locals had left the wood untouched. The fact that Wolfgang died at the age of 66 was not least a result of the infections that he had suffered in the wild.

After its founder's death, five women now jointly manage the project. The experienced plant conservationists Laly Joseph, Suma Keloth and Purvi Jain were trained by Wolfgang. They are responsible for different endangered species in the nursery, garden and biotopes. Leelamma Theuerkauf is in charge of the community kitchen and the farm, whereas Suprabha Seshan directs the renaturation activities, educational program and public relations. She joined the Sanctuary in 1993, and as an author and on lecture tours she brings her knowledge and experience of the project to the world. In her role as director of the foundation that manages a portion of the land, she takes care of fundraising. She describes her work at the Sanctuary as "a daily dance between despair and resuscitating delight". About 10 other people are part of the permanent team or spend every year a few months in the project.

Decent work for the neighbourhood

The Sanctuary is also a major employer for the village. Many workers arrive on the site at 8 am daily, except Sundays. They set up flowerbeds and pathways, water the plants, and help with construction works and everything else that needs to be done. Working in the heat is often difficult, but everyone I meet seems to be happy and smiles at me. They radiate dignity, and I can feel the appreciation they encounter here. They get two meals a day and work finishes at 5pm. Yet most of them have no interest in learning about the complex plant care in more detail. Physical work is not particularly valued, many prefer to work in an office and move to the cities. Women often stop working once they get married. However, over the years more than 100 women were trained in plant conservation and breeding.

On a walk through the rainforest Suprabha tells me that the destruction of the rainforest is getting worse. While until now tea farms used to be the biggest problem, these days the forest is increasingly being cleared for the construction of luxury hotels. Since for legal reasons the foundation cannot buy more land, friends and supporters now acquire plots and make them available to the project. This is however hampered by the fact that land prices have multiplied in recent years.

Suddenly Suprabha stops and gives me a sign to be quiet. She heard something – it could be a large animal. I did not notice anything, but I feel her tension. For a while we remain in silence, then her attitude relaxes and she says it is good now. Maybe it was an elephant. I realise how lost I am in the wild – I cannot interpret her signs, nor even perceive them.

As we walk further, she shows me the overgrown remains of a tea patch from which they have tediously removed the tea plants to let nature take over. Some neighbours consider them crazy because they do not try to make money by selling tea.

Propagation, conservation and release of plants into the wild

Suma, who came to the Sanctuary as a worker in 1993, leads me through the garden. Besides the Jacobinia with its delicate yellow flowers that catches my eye immediately, she shows me the many Araceae, characterised by their long inflorescences. Some of them protrude just like noses from colourful, often almost unnaturally shiny leaves. Bromeliads grow on trees, in whose cavities they settle without feeding off the tree substance. Some ferns rise as tall as trees, some have hairy stems. They live up to 300 or 400 years, and orchids like to grow on their stems. There are more than 500 different varieties of orchids here that bloom at different times. Jewel orchids, for example, grow on the ground and owe their name to the leaves, which display a particularly fine pattern in the sunlight. As supply during drought periods, orchids save water in the leaves or in thickenings of the leaf stalk. Impatiens have seedpods that spring open all of a sudden, which is why they are also called "snapweed". On one plant, or even on one stalk, wild begonias develop at the same time both male and female flowers.

Even though I am a lifelong vegetarian, I am particularly fascinated by the more than 50 different varieties of carnivorous plants. Some snap shut after having "caught" insects with their sticky leaves. Others have fine hairs, which release a secretion that can even paralyse small birds. The really big ones look as if they could "swallow" birds or mice in their pouches – but according to Suma this has not been observed here yet.

The plants receive the fertile soil which comes closest to their natural needs. For example, self-produced charcoal or compost from shrub pruning, after all leaves from poisonous trees are cautiously removed and it has been heated on fire to sterilize it against fungal attack. A staff member is just cleaning a fine-leaved Huperzia, which – just like the Platycerioides – belongs to the non-flowering plants. Platycerioides firmly hold on to the trees with their grey-brown leaves while their green leaves take on fascinating shapes and gradually form a brown coating of spores at the tips. In the nursery they grow – just like some orchids – on vertically hanging boards of palm trunks with tufts of fern roots tied to them.

For a while I participate. I carefully detach an orchid that needs more space for its roots, from the wood. I use a wooden stick for it, and then clean the roots of solid wood and the remains of hanging fern roots. It is a challenge to do this fiddly work without rushing, almost meditative, and with the necessary care for the plant roots, which should not be destroyed. In doing so I have to refrain from any perfection, because sometimes a small piece of root gets nevertheless broken, and the roots hardly become completely clean. Even though it is stressful for the plant, careful cleaning is important, since if the substrate would rot, the plant would end up suffering. After a few years, when it is strong enough, it is planted onto a tree.

The man who planted a million flowers

The Western Ghats is one of the most biodiverse areas of the world. The Sanctuary considers itself as a "refugee camp for plants". In 2006, on behalf of the Sanctuary, Suprabha received the prestigious Whitley Award, which is granted annually to outstanding nature conservation projects. The Sanctuary is funded through educational activities and donations, and is supported e.g. by the well-known writer and activist Arundhati Roy – a dear friend of Suprabha. It is not a botanical garden with opening times and entrance fees, but a place visited by about 3,000 people every year. School classes, mainly from the surrounding area but also from the UK, learn in the wild here. On July 19th 2016 a Titan Arum flower that Suma had lovingly maintained for eight years, flourished. Many guests and hundreds of schoolchildren came, and media reported that it was the first time that this rare event was observed in India. The Titan Arum reached a height of two metres.

Wolfgang Theuerkauf lives on – not only in the Sanctuary he founded, but also in the frog

“*Raorchestes theuerkaufii*” and in the plant “*Impatiens theuerkaufii*”, both named after him. Thomas Theuerkauf assumes that his brother discovered more plants not yet described, but that he did not register them officially as such recognition procedure is lengthy and costly. Many records and photos are preserved in the library of the Sanctuary, which hopefully one day will be evaluated and made accessible. Wolfgang was a man of practice, by some declared as crazy because of his devotion to plants, highly valued by others. Suprabha remembers him as "my friend, and co-conspirator on this journey with plants, as a man who planted a million flowers”.

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Translation from German to English by Anna Katharina Voss.

Virtual visit of the plant reserve:

www.gbsanctuary.org

<http://gurukulabotanicalsanctuary.tumblr.com>

www.shibumifriends.wordpress.com