



GreenFriends North America NEWSLETTER

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GreenFriends strives to communicate the importance of treating Nature with respect and gratitude.

We invite each of you Green Friends to share your ideas and experiences with your own gardening efforts as well as experiences with animals.


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AMMA'S WORDS



 As the pandemic marches on, we are called upon to examine how we live our lives and what our relationship is with Nature. Amma and others have said that the virus is Nature's reaction to the abuse we have heaped upon Her.

In one of her recent talks, Amma said,

“This is a time of awakening. Humans have the strength, courage, goodness and love within themselves to overcome and survive any disaster. All that is needed is to wake up. This is not the time to succumb to fear and disappointment. On the other hand, this is the time to awaken our powers of discrimination and awareness.”

“What should be our attitude towards future generations? Our goal should not be to fulfill our selfish desires. If we use the earth's resources so that they will still be there for the future generations, then the needs of both generations can be satisfied...”

LESSONS I LEARNED FROM GARDENING



Mung beans started from beans, with seed pods, ready for picking (when dark), and finally harvested.



“LOOK AT NATURE. NATURE IS A TEXTBOOK FROM WHICH WE MUST LEARN. EACH OBJECT IN IT IS A PAGE OF THAT BOOK.” - AMMA

PATIENCE

**“Patience, constant enthusiasm and firm determination are necessary factors for success.”
- Amma**

Every part of the gardening process teaches us patience. For most plants, starting seeds requires weeks to months of patiently waiting for the first shoots to appear. How much joy and hope there is on seeing those tiny little green shoots sticking out the soil. In the cold and often gloomy New England spring those first signs of life brought me much joy.

Then comes the waiting period for the last frost to pass. While many cool weather crops can be planted before the last frost, many vegetables require waiting till after so as not damage or kill the tender seedlings.

Once everything is planted, comes the daily waiting for the first blooms, then the tiny vegetables. Once those are spotted, then waiting for the vegetables to ripen or mature and ready to be picked.

In the fast-paced world we have become accustomed to living in, plants and vegetables teach us that everything happens in its due course - that too much or too little at the wrong time can be disastrous to the crop and time does bear fruit.

“Attachment is loading the mind and detachment is unloading the mind.” – Amma



Spring Irises and Summer Salvia and Marigolds

DETACHMENT

The hardest part of being a gardener has been to let go of seeds that did not become seedlings, seedlings that did not survive and plants that died due to environmental conditions like pests or for unknown reasons.

With every plant that I lost, I mourned the loss, but it did not prevent myself from continuing. I did more research. I thought about whether I could have done anything differently and then I moved on.

I tried growing Hydrangeas for several years in a row. I thought I had found a spot in my garden with the right amount of light. After they didn't survive the first year, I tried amending the soil. That didn't work. I researched its water needs and tried to do things differently the third year but finally decided that for that garden, Hydrangeas were just not going to work. I grew many other varieties of beautiful flowering plants over the years there.

PREVENTION

“The love of awakened motherhood is a love and compassion felt not only towards one’s own children, but towards all people, animals and plants, rocks and rivers—a love extended to all of Nature, all beings.” - Amma



Aphids on the underside of the collard seedlings

The first year I planted tomato seedlings, after a few days I found several plants flopped to the ground. On doing research I found out about cutworms. They live in the soil and like to eat the stems of tender plants. I learnt to put a collar of an impenetrable material around the plant when putting them in the ground. I also learnt that planting marigolds with tomato plants helps keep certain parasites called nematodes away from the roots.

The next year, I had many beautiful round eggplants almost ready for picking. The garden plot was inside a fence. I walked in one day to find every single eggplant had a huge bite taken out of it. On looking at the fence, I realized that some creature had dug a hole underneath the fence to get in. I surrounded the plants with their own mini fences.



Yellow leaves on the tomatoes

I have a balcony garden now, and given the very hot and dry summer we have been having here, I found a webbing on my zucchini plants. A very knowledgeable friend helped me identify the issue to be spider mites. I sprayed the underside of all the leaves with water to break their reproductive cycle and wiped off as many of them as I could from the bottom of the leaves. I also keep finding aphids on my collard plants and have to keep washing them off. Now I check the plants regularly and spray the leaves with water on hot dry days.

And it is possible that in spite of these actions, I may lose the plant. At which point I will release my attachment to seeing the end results.

The leaves of my tomato plants started turning yellow and I thought I had been overwatering them. But when I was showing my friend photos of the webbing, she mentioned that my tomato plants were hungry and needed fertilizer. After applying an organic fertilizer to the soil, their leaves have started turning green.

TIMING

"The nature of the world is one of change." - Amma

There is a time and place for everything. In the spring when I first started building flower beds, I went to the nurseries and bought pots of blooming flowers. Over the years, I understood that plants sold at nurseries (especially at big box stores) are meant to be in bloom at the time they are put outside. Their blooms don't always last for the full growing season.

So I started visiting nurseries at least once each season to see what was blooming and how long the flowering season was for the plants that were blooming. After a few years, I was able to create a beautiful 3-season garden where different clusters of plants were always in bloom.



Fragrant Mock Orange in the late Spring



Late Spring Lilacs

I also ordered flowering trees like Rose of Sharon and Lilacs from an inexpensive catalog. When they arrived they were just foot-long twigs. I followed the instructions and planted them. 12 years later when I sold that home, the Rose of Sharon trees were 20 feet high and the Lilac bush was 8 feet tall putting out many fragrant clusters of lilac flowers every spring.

TOO MUCH OF A GOOD THING

"Beware; your actions in the present determine your future." - Amma

My philosophy has generally been to "Live and let Live" and "Anything goes". But in the world of gardening as in life, that idea doesn't always work.

The first time I grew okra plants, I got many beautiful okras. I let them grow and grow and grow. If you have ever grown okra, you already know how this story ends. Okra needs to be picked when tender. If you leave it too long, it becomes woody and inedible.



Sucker that should be picked, in red circle.

You have to know how much fertilizer to apply. If you apply too much, you can burn the plants especially if you apply it to the leaves when you should be applying to the soil.

As a vegan, I have a very hard time killing living things. But when you find pests on your plants you need to get rid of them immediately or things can get bad quickly.

Many plants benefit from pruning. Tomatoes have auxiliary stems called suckers that take up nutrients and cause smaller tomatoes even if more of them. Removing the suckers gives bigger tomatoes.

Deadheading flowers before they go to seed (unless you want seeds), allows the plant to produce more flowers instead of spending energy making seeds.

Plants like peonies and tomatoes need stakes or cages to support them. Without support, they will flop over. It is important to support the plants before they get too big otherwise they will bend from the weight and supporting them once bent is a lot harder.

Some trees drop helicopter seeds all over the lawn and flower beds. In the case of Maple seeds, they grow into shoots very quickly, and the roots can run very deep and grow thick fast. If you don't pull them out when the shoots are a few inches, taking them out is a lot of work. If you don't pay attention, you may suddenly have a maple tree growing in your flower bed.

Being a gardener is an emotional journey. There will be loss but also lots of beauty and joy. You never stop learning and the constantly changing environmental conditions are always waiting to challenge you. Perseverance, patience, preventative care, detachment, timely action and knowledge can go a long way to helping you along your gardening journey.

~ A GARDENER,
BOSTON, MA




Peonies with stakes.

MILK CRATE COMPOST - EASY & EFFECTIVE IDEAS FOR BACKYARDS AND BALCONIES



The compost stack sits behind the trees.

 **I'M LUCKY ENOUGH TO LIVE IN A CITY WITH INDUSTRIAL COMPOST - TORONTO, CANADA.**

We divide our household waste into garbage, recycling, and compost. We get curbside pick-up for each.

I was merrily composting using my city's service for years. Then I moved into a building complex, where I learned that apartment buildings have the option to opt-out of city compost. What?! My composting days came to a sudden halt. My garbage output was now double or triple what it used to be.

I couldn't sit with that for long. I started separating my compost again, and bringing it along with me to friends' houses, to deposit into their compost bins. This was not a long-term solution (for my compost problems or my popularity). So we researched how to have our own compost. Not even a backyard compost; a balcony compost!



Here is the stack of composting crates.

Of course we had some concerns:

- Smell. We did not want to create a foul smell for ourselves and our neighbours.
- Space. We have a balcony, not a backyard. This had to be small.
- Efficiency. You can toss food scraps into an outdoor pile, and see them live on forever. Without an active system, the scraps won't break down. We needed this thing to work.

We investigated worms; we concluded they'd die over the winter on our balcony. We investigated commercial backyard compost devices; they would not fit on our balcony. We investigated use of heat and other fancy methods; it was expensive, impractical, or we had concerns with the environmental impact of the composter itself.

Finally, we found something just right. Simple. Smell-free. Low/no-cost. Small. And effective.

OUR SYSTEM

We have three milk crates. We purchased some mesh-like material to line the inside of the bins. There needs to be air flow, but the holes of the milk crates would be too large and things would fall out.

We stacked our crates. This is ideal because they take up less space that way. The stacking also allows moisture to drip down and soluble nutrients to fall through to the bottom.

Each crate contains a different stage of compost. The bottom is the closest to dirt. The top has fresh compost, barely decomposed.



The top crate being stirred with fresh scraps.



The middle crate; halfway to becoming soil.

My job is to feed the compost. I fill a small bucket with veggie scraps. My husband periodically empties that bucket into our milk crate system.

New scraps go into the top box. It gets mixed with dry leaves (we collect those from our neighbours in the fall) or tiny dry paper-like scraps. The top box gets stirred with a big stick about once a week, to make sure oxygen is getting in. (If it's not stirred, it would grow unhealthy bacteria and produce more methane).

We also add water to the top box. Imagine as if you were watering a houseplant, about once a week. This helps keep it humid. If you see fruit flies, they are likely helping to speed up decomposition.

When the top box is about 3/4 full, most of it gets moved down to the middle box. The top box remains about 1/4 full, when the middle one receives it's new load of compost. The middle box doesn't need stirring as frequently. It only gets stirred when it's getting filled. When the middle box reaches about 3/4 full, it similarly has most of its contents emptied into the bottom box. This might happen about once or twice a year (note: our composting 'year' is pretty short in Canada).

In early spring, we take composted material from the bottom box and put it into our garden pots. It's kind of a lumpy looking soil, so it's not perfect, but it does the trick.

WHAT GOES IN

The list of acceptable items for an industrial compost facility is quite long: veggie scraps, meat scraps, paper muffin wrappers, even diapers. They do not, however, compost "compostable plastic" like those misleading "biodegradable bags or cutlery".



The bottom crate can be put into a garden and used as soil.

Virtually no city is equipped to compost “biodegradable plastic” because it requires a significantly higher temperature and about three times more time, which is simply not cost-effective or even possible for any municipality, but I digress.

The backyard or balcony compost takes: fruit and veggie scraps. You don’t want dairy or animal products in there, as it will create an unpleasant smell and disrupt your happy compost. Egg shells are not harmful, but they don’t really break down. Tiny scraps of egg carton or bathroom tissue or dried leaves are useful.

THE WINTER AND THE UN-COMPOSTABLE

Once winter hits, our compost slows down and stops. Without heat, nothing breaks down. And pretty soon the compost is frozen solid. We can add a few more veggie scraps, but after not too long, there is no more space. The balcony compost is closed for the winter.

I’ve taken to storing my scraps in a plastic bag on the balcony. It’s frozen, so there’s no mess and no smell. This would amount to too much to introduce to our balcony compost in the spring though, plus it would be melting and messy by the time the compost re-opens.

So I deal with it while it’s still frozen. My neighbourhood has lots of community boards and forums. I sent out a request to use someone else’s city compost bin during the winter. A few willing neighbours offered their bins, so I occasionally take a walk with my frozen compost bags to be deposited into an available bin.

I do the same for other items I acquire that don’t go in our compost, but do go in the city compost. Like a paper muffin wrapper, an excess of egg shells, or a giant avocado pit. But otherwise, we are able to compost the majority of our food waste, right on our balcony.

I hope I’ve inspired you to start a compost. I would have thought it sounds hard, but really, it’s not. This is our third year using the milk crate compost and we’ve had no issues at all with smell or bugs or anything else. Of course it takes a little effort, but anything we can do for Nature is a way to show our gratitude for everything She does for us.

~NATASHA,
TORONTO, ONTARIO

BLUEBIRDS OF HAPPINESS



Mountain Bluebird.



“HOW BEAUTIFUL WOULD OUR LAND BE IF IT WERE FULL OF BIRDS, BUTTERFLIES AND FLOWER GROVES! IF THE LAND WERE TO BECOME RICH, THAT RICHNESS WILL REFLECT IN OUR INDIVIDUAL LIVES AS WELL. WE WILL BE FULL OF JOY AND BEAUTY, WITHIN AND WITHOUT.”

~ AMMA

Many years ago through Amma’s grace, my husband and I were given the means to purchase a simple solar-oriented home just a stone’s throw from the Santa Fe Amma Center ashram. Slowly over the years, we planted numerous fruit trees and established raised beds for vegetables, growing flowers for the birds, butterflies, and bees. We greatly anticipated another spring in which we would consider what beds would be planted, what seeds to sow and harvested through the summer and fall.

With this in mind, we headed off to what we thought would be a week-long retreat in the refuge of the stark and spaciousness skies of the San Luis Valley of Colorado, bordered by 14,000 foot peaks of the Sangre de Cristos at a small house we had just purchased. However, while we were there, the

Covid pandemic stay at home order took hold, and a week's retreat extended into months. Amma's message to be in harmony with, and have respect for nature, grew into the notion of establishing a small garden, since we obviously could not get our annual garden going in Santa Fe.

Amma says, "Whether plants, flowers, fruits or vegetables, Nature shares her bounty with animals and human beings alike. Birds and animals help plants disperse their seed and spread their reach. Trees offer shade to animals and shelter to birds, Animals and bird droppings provide organic fertilizer to trees and plants."

The call to action to start a garden seemed like a conscious act of kindness not to mention the responsible thing to do. We carefully chose a location that was protected from the intensity of spring winds behind the house near two small out buildings. While exploring the perfect site for setting up our raised beds, we discovered of a pair of nesting mountain bluebirds just feet away in the elevated penthouse of our propane tank.

The male mountain bluebird is stunning - the color of the brilliant southwestern sky. We were both dazzled and honored by their presence. Coexisting with the birds then took on a life of its own. We adopted a do-no-harm attitude, setting up birdbaths nearby and putting out blueberries when we had them.

According to Amma, "We must protect our plants, trees, and every other living being, understand them as being a part of ourselves. It is the duty of human beings to protect all living creature as our brothers and sisters. It is high time that this awareness arises in us."



Our small garden by the propane tank.

We began spending short periods of time just a few feet away from the bird's abode in the propane tank, giving us the opportunity to observe them closely, and for them to get used to us. (Their act of generosity in sharing their space with us seemed far more significant than our sharing the garden space with them.) We slowly gained their trust while also discovering their daily routines - their day and night activities of catching moths and other bugs, their specific flight pathways and designated points for food sources plus the monitoring of potential predators. We acknowledged that the garden would be delayed or perhaps even thwarted. To the "Bluebirds of Happiness," we surrendered.



Mr. Blue guarding the door

Amma speaks about the importance of setting up birdhouse and feeders. **She says, "Leave some water for the birds to drink and a handful of grain. In the heat of the summer, let the birds come and drink the water and eat the grain."**

Once the baby bluebirds hatched, many times a day over about three weeks, Mr. and Mrs. Blue, as we called them, would make regular trips into the propane tank with worms or moths to feed the babies. We could tell by the sounds of chirping each time the parents went in that there were at least three young ones. We eagerly awaited their emergence from the tank.

When the babies finally made their debut, much to our disappointment we were not around to see them come out. It became eerily quiet around the old propane tank. We figured that once the young came out of the nest, the parenting duties would also end and the young birds would fly off into the sunset, but that's not the way it works with mountain bluebirds. The parents' job is far from over.

The tank's back door with 14,000 foot peaks



The tank's back door with 14,000-foot peaks

The baby bluebirds (three females) could fly enough to get out of the propane tank, but that was about it. They spent the next few days pretty much on the ground in various locations around the outside of the house while Mr. and Mrs. Blue continued to bring them insects to feast on. Little by little, they became more independent and once again, we assumed they would eventually fly off somewhere.

Not so. In retrospect, as far as the three sisters were concerned, the house was just as much their house as it was our house.

A particular incident illustrates this point. One evening a terrific storm came raging across the valley. As is not uncommon, it was accompanied by high winds. One significant blast must have reached over 50 mph and sustained for close to two minutes. It practically shook the house. I went upstairs to check the windows and discovered two of the sisters inside the open casement window, but still outside the screen.

One of them was perched on the sill, but the other one was clinging to the screen and beating her wings, desperately trying to get inside. First I tried to dissuade her by gently speaking to her, telling her she could not come inside the house. She was not to be deterred. I even pressed my fingers against her through the screen and she still wouldn't relent.

Finally, after about five minutes, she calmed down enough to join her sister on the sill. The poor thing was so scared by the storm. In the weeks that followed, the three sisters would regularly come

and visit just before nightfall, perching just a couple of feet away from us before they fly up to spend the night, huddled on the side of the house.

So cute.



One of the sisters pay a visit

Mountain bluebirds frequently have more than one brood in a summer and Mr. and Mrs. Blue were no exception. We were once again treated to regular flights in and out of the propane tank with Mr. and Mrs. Blue bearing gifts of insects.

And as before, the babies eventually popped out and spent the next couple of nights on the ground while their parents called to them from perches above, encouraging them to fly. The dedication and selflessness of the parents is an inspiration to behold. Even the three older sisters appears to have gotten into the act, if not actually feeding their younger siblings, at least flying nearby and providing moral support.

And our garden, as meagre as it is, has survived and flourished. It has been a delightful and blessed journey, getting to know our extended bluebird family. We are grateful for this intimate gift from nature.

“There is known to be an eagle... who once dropped raw fish into Amma’s lap when she was lost in deep meditation... This same eagle, continues to be seen sometimes perches on the balcony railing behind the temple...just feet from where Amma is giving darshan.” - Amma

**~ BHUVANA,
CRESTONE, COLORADO**

DAILY GARDEN PONDERINGS AT AMMA CENTER NEW MEXICO



EVERY DAY IS SOMETHING NEW. THANKS TO AMMA'S GRACE, I'VE HAD A GARDEN IN ALMOST EVERY PLACE I'VE LIVED.

Each one presented a different challenge of climate, soil and pests. Similar but different. Even in Philadelphia I had a plot with others, salvaged from a vacant lot.

It is a joy and a privilege to live in our little oasis at 7600 feet here among the Juniper and Pinon forests of the dry, New Mexico high desert. Below, I've shared some of my daily garden ponderings while gardening at Amma Center New Mexico. Enjoy!

DAY 1

I think about other people like me all around the world growing food. I like to describe backyard gardening as somewhere on a continuum between grocery shopping and foraging for food in the wild.

Unlike grocery shopping, we have to go outside, and then gather, clean, and preserve food that is growing in the garden and orchard. But unlike hunting and gathering, we have to tend the garden; watering, sheltering it from pests, weeding, adding nutrients to the soil, etc. At least with a garden, your food is nearby, but the work is labor intensive.



The garden at Amma Center of New Mexico

DAY 2

It's spring and as a result of leaving things to go to seed there are thousands of seeds in the soil. It's amazing how many sprout up willy-nilly; parsley chamomile, orach (red spinach), dill, bee plant, red kale, sunflowers, marigolds, calendula, cosmos, etc.

In the compost pile we have squash and potatoes growing!



Raised bed/hoop garden

DAY 3

Amma says “Life is complete when humanity and Nature move in conjoined harmony, rhythm and melody flowing synchronously, creating glorious music.”

Creating an organic garden is a magical process that requires the gardener and Nature to work in harmony. The result is a natural ecosystem that ideally benefits nature and humans alike.



Take this as a sign

DAY 4

Oh no! Somebody is eating our lettuce! Maybe it's a squirrel or a rabbit but the live trap was empty for a week. Then I found the little black beetles that I remembered from last year.

But really? Can they do that much damage? It's a mystery and a challenge.

DAY 5

Early this morning three deer came by looking longingly at the lettuce, thankfully guarded by the deer fence. They also love the roses in the front garden - eating the tips and drinking from the fountain.

Thankfully there are now fly catchers taking care of the insects.



Volunteer wildflowers

DAY 6

Weeding is like a meditation. My mind wanders to my mother who taught me how to garden. I've had homegrown veggies all my life.

Here at the ashram, I'm amazed at the diversity of plants! We have many edible and medicinal weeds along with the noxious ones: purslane, lambs quarters, mallow, mullein, and many unidentified wildflowers in the orchard.

I think, "Well...in the case that there is an environmental disaster at, least we can eat the weeds!"

~ ANASWARA
SANTA FE, NEW MEXICO



TURTLE STORIES OF THE AMRITA NATURE SANCTUARY FOR NATIVE WILDLIFE PART ONE



Baby turtle fresh from the egg.



A FEW MILES FROM THE AMRITAPURI ASHRAM, ADJACENT TO THE SCHOOL AMMA ATTENDED AS A CHILD, IS THE AMRITA NATURE SANCTUARY AND ORGANIC GARDEN.

The Nature Sanctuary is a large area dedicated to providing a biologically diverse habitat for wildlife and native fauna, growing medicinal and sacred trees, Ayurvedic herbs, flowers, and organic fruits and vegetables.

In 2015, a special discovery was made which helped shape the vision of creating a nature sanctuary where native wildlife could thrive.

While digging holes to plant trees, two eggs were found buried in the soil. We gathered around, unsure of what kind of eggs we had found and worried as they had been slightly cracked. As we held them, two tiny turtles started to emerge one after the other.

We were very excited to see the turtles, although a bit apprehensive that we had disturbed them and they hatched too early. We immediately brought the small turtles to Amma within an hour of them being born.



Amma was overjoyed seeing the new born turtles and affectionately held them and let them crawl on her. She innocently asked us some questions about what they liked to eat but we had no idea. We told Amma that we were worried they had hatched prematurely. Amma responded confidently,

"Amma knows these turtles very well. Do not worry, they will be fine in a few days. You should keep looking as there could be one hundred more of them!"

We were shocked as we had never seen any turtles in the garden before.

We didn't know if we should put the newborn turtles back where we found them or try to take care of them, so after a few days we went to Amma again. Amma said to keep them in a tub of water with water plants and rocks and explained how to care for them.

Recently some children in the ashram also found some baby turtles and I was surprised to hear Amma give them some very different advice. Speaking to the children, Amma said to return the babies to where they were found and that the mother would be looking for them.

Turtles and other reptiles are not known to care for their young in the traditional way, yet ancient Vedic tradition states that mother turtles are able to cause their newborns to hatch merely by the

power of their loving thought. Amma of course, understanding the hearts of all creatures, could sense the Mother's concern for her young.

Reflecting back to five years ago, I realized that Amma must have had the intention of helping us develop a close bond with the turtles by telling us to care for them at that time. Following Amma's instructions, we set up to take care of the newborn turtles. One turtle did not live many days but the other was healthy, energetic and inquisitive. He was named Kurma, the Sanskrit name for turtle.

One couple who was caring for Kurma after a few months took him to Amma's room when they had their private room Darshan. Amma was delighted to see Kurma and spent a long time feeding him various foods and mentioned that she wished he had someone to share his heart with. A very lucky turtle to spend time with Amma in her room and receive his third darshan!

Soon after, Kurma was released into a pond in the Nature Sanctuary Garden. For a few weeks no one had spotted him, and so we figured as he had been set free, we would not be seeing him again. Out of curiosity one day, I decided to sit at the edge of the pond and started calling his name and telling him that I would like to see him. Kurma slowly poked his head up from the thick covering of hyacinth flowers covering the pond.

He soon came to me and ate his favorite snacks from my hands. This continued for a few days. Following his lead a few wild, young turtles started to join him. Seeing Kurma's bold behavior, crawling into our laps and eating from our hands, the others slowly lost their shyness and also ate from our hands. Kurma had definitely found others to share his heart with!

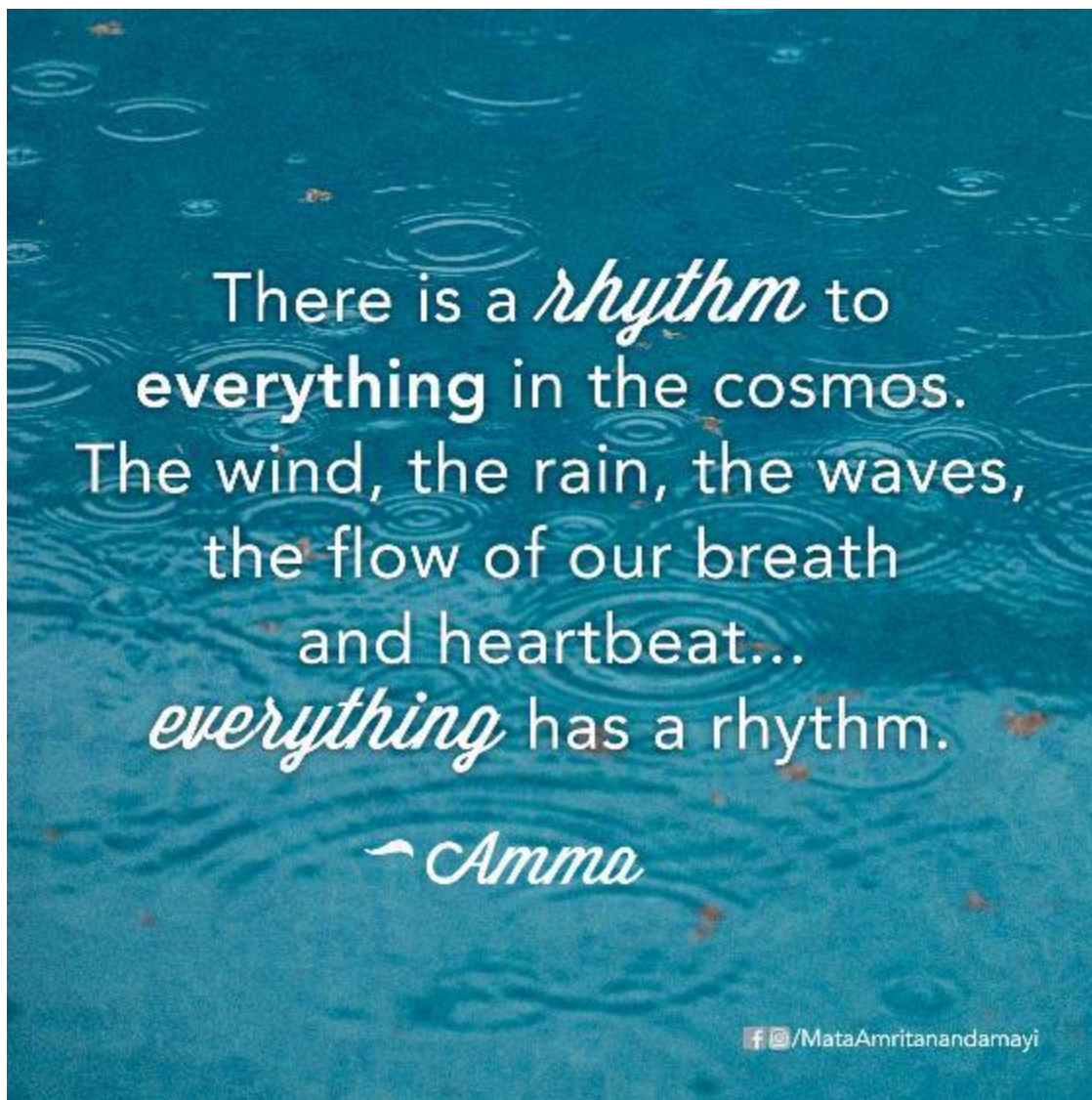


Kurma

Over time more and more turtles would join the occasional snack time. We slowly started spotting wild turtles all over the sanctuary and would gradually gain their confidence and start to feed them from our hands and pet them.

Just as Amma has said, there were at least 100 turtles that had found a safe and protected habit in the Nature Sanctuary.

~ SARVAGA
AMRITAPURI, INDIA



LOTUS GARDEN AT MA CENTER, SAN RAMON, CA



Ashram garden.



AN INTERVIEW WITH AMARTYA

GreenFriends: Why did you decide to start a vegetable garden here at the San Ramon ashram? Talk about your inspiration. How did you choose the location?

Amartya: The inspiration for the vegetable garden came from Amma, as She has said many times that everyone would benefit from growing organic vegetables in their yards. Due to the availability of water from the Lotus Pond, we decided on a somewhat flat piece of land beside the pond for

the vegetable garden. The land needed a lot of preparation to become the garden, and with the completion of a permanent fence, it was ready by May 2019.

GreenFriends: How did you create the beds?

Amartya: The garden consists of permanent raised beds that we made with a mixture of soil, compost, straw, partially composted wood chips, aged manure and decaying leaves. In order to preserve the delicate soil food web year after year, we do not till the soil. We produce our own compost by using raw food scraps as the main ingredient and add this compost every few months to continue to improve and nourish the soil. To prevent weeds and evaporation, we lay straw as a mulch to cover all the beds as it is a readily available and inexpensive resource. Other mulch materials can also be used such as wood chips, leaves, grass clippings, cardboard and newspaper. We line the walkways between the rows of plants with wood chips to keep the walkways clearly marked.



Lotus Pond

GreenFriends: What are you growing? How did you choose what to grow?

Amartya: We are growing organic heirloom varieties of popular vegetables throughout the season, and due to the region's temperate climate, a lot of cool season vegetables can be grown during the winter. Our current crop consists of tomatoes, cucumbers, kale, spinach, potatoes, leeks, summer and winter squash, eggplant, peppers, green beans, okra, corn, and a variety of melons and herbs. Through future fundraising efforts, we also look forward to the addition of a large solid greenhouse. This greenhouse will extend our growing seasons and options significantly, enabling us to grow micro-greens as well as to offer organic seedlings to the community.



Squash and tomatoes.

GreenFriends: Explain your watering methods? Why these methods?

Amartya: Due to the severe water restrictions and shortages at MA Center San Ramon, we did extensive research to find the best irrigation method in order to conserve water. We decided on buried clay pot irrigation, which has been used in India, China and the Americas for thousands of years. This method essentially eliminates water loss through evaporation by getting the water directly to the roots. Irrigations lines are set up with timers and feed the water directly into the buried clay pots (ollas).

Clay pot irrigation saves 88% water as compared to surface drip irrigation. In addition, the rows that had clay pots performed much better than the drip irrigated rows in 2019, yielding 60% more produce. In 2020, we implemented clay pot irrigation in all of our garden beds.



GreenFriends: How are you protecting the plants from being eaten by bugs and animals? Are there plants and animals which keep the pest away?

Amartya: Last year we did some companion planting where herbs and flowers were planted among the vegetables to help control pests. Marigolds are one flower which we planted and are great companions for most plants. We will do the same this year, but we also closely monitor the plants' health and apply organic solutions whenever possible to help the plants along.

For bacterial infections we use neem oil, and for crawling pests we sprinkle diatomaceous earth. We encourage pest eating creatures like birds and lady beetles by providing them with habitat and water sources. We also installed 2 hummingbird feeders as they will also eat pests along with nectar.

Ladybugs have been frequently sighted in the garden this year; they will eat several kinds of pests including aphids. We also work to boost the immunity of the plants and soil by applying compost tea to all the plants and soil several times during the season. We do not ever use poisons or chemical solutions to manage pests, but sometimes mechanical restraints need to be utilized.

To keep raccoons and possums away from the grapes, corn and melons, we will be installing an electric fence this year. In principle however it is good to recognize that in a garden, there will be other creatures besides humans who can enjoy the fruits of nature, so recognizing this and allowing them to be there is essential, as long as their numbers are under control and there is a harmonious balance in the garden.

GreenFriends: Any special methods of structural support for certain plants?

Amartya: We have installed wooden arbor to support the loofah sponges we are growing this year. Additionally, we have fence trellises for cucumbers and handmade tomato cages. Melons, which are ground vines, were strategically planted so that they can trail over the small hill at the edge of the garden.

We are also experimenting with the 'Three Sisters' method of planting originated by the First Nations People of this land. Beans, squash and corn are planted close together to provide mutual support and harvesting balance. Beans add nitrogen to the soil, and are the first to be harvested. Corn provides a structure for the beans to climb and is the next to be harvested. Squash provide shade cover at the roots of all three plants and are the last to be harvested.



Corn in raised rows

GreenFriends: What are some of the most rewarding aspects and the biggest challenges?

Amartya: In 2019 the vegetables grown in the garden provided food for the ashram residents and a surplus of romaine lettuce was used for Amma's summer program at the ashram. Even Amma was able to enjoy food cooked with vegetables grown here, including broccoli, cauliflower, zucchini, kale and spinach.

Our biggest challenge last year was getting to know the garden and how much it can realistically produce. This year the garden is twice as large and we have started offering organic produce for curbside pickup for the satsang community. By July we will hopefully have a fully stocked farm stand on Saturdays for the broader community. Satsang members can see updates on the activities via the e-newsletter as well as posts on our [Facebook](#) page.



~ AMARTYA,
SAN RAMON, CALIFORNIA

GOING ZERO WASTE – STRATEGIES TO REDUCE AND RECYCLE PACKAGING



A couple of supplies we have on hand. The smaller jars contain castile soap, which I use as a key ingredient in laundry detergent. I also mix castille soap with essential oils for household cleaning; some essential oils have antibacterial properties.



“AS THINGS HEAT UP IN THE WORLD AND MOTHER NATURE SEEKS TO HEAL HERSELF BY KEEPING US INDOORS, AMMA SAYS IT IS IMPORTANT TO LEARN HOW TO LIVE IN HARMONY WITH NATURE.

One thing we can do is re-read the Indeed Pledges and spread them. Another thing we can do is try to reduce our carbon and usage footprints by trying to go as Zero Waste as possible. The more we can keep out of landfills and air, the less we produce, and the more eco-friendly and non-toxic

our production systems, the better. In this article, we will present ways to go Zero Waste, even given the current pandemic, with strategies to reduce and recycle packaging.

MAKE YOUR OWN

There are recipes for laundry detergent, tooth powder, deodorant, dish soap, lip balm, shampoo and shower gel on the internet. Although the ingredients for some of these do come in plastic, you can still cut down on waste by making them yourself and making a pledge to recycle the packaging. So far, I have found laundry detergent and tooth powder recipes that work for me.

For sensitive skin, limit the amount of baking soda in any homemade deodorant. I also personally do not like working with beeswax as it tends to become rather tough and stick to my pans. It may take a few tries to find recipes and methods you like, but eventually, it will happen.

Personally, I prefer simple recipes and approaches. For lip balm and moisturizer, rather than getting fancy with recipes, I just use plain cocoa or shea butter. You can find sellers who will sell these products in paper packaging - or if you buy in plastic bulk and reuse/recycle the plastic, you will still be limiting your waste.

You can also look for ways to make your own versions of commonly packaged food items to cut down on waste - look for simple blender-based, ice cream recipes, use a spiralizer to make veggie pasta, etc. Try to use electronics you already have and/or use durable tools (i.e. a manual spiralizer that you can resharpen) for these recipes so as to prevent e-waste and unnecessary accumulation of gadgets.

BOXES AND BULK INSTEAD OF PLASTIC PACKAGING

Rather than making your own, you can always pledge to try and use paper or recyclable packing instead of plastic packaging as much as possible . There are deodorant bars, shampoo bars and soap bars you can buy online. They seem more expensive, but they tend to last longer. For dish soap, try to buy in bulk or find a supplier who allows you to refill dish soap at their stores using your own container. For toothpaste, switch to tooth powder that comes in a metal tin.

On a related note, for when we are eating out again, bring reusable containers to carry food out from restaurants – whether takeout or leftovers. Most restaurants will oblige. You can find "collapsible" lunch boxes online that are handy and easy to store to use in a pinch. Or, try to only eat at restaurants that use real dishes and/or compostable containers. I categorically do not buy from restaurants that will not let me use my own boxes or do not offer takeout containers that are mostly compostable. I always refuse the cutlery - if it's a delivery order, sometimes you need to call the restaurant to request no cutlery or napkins and paper instead of plastic bags.

If the restaurant uses plastic cutlery for sit-down meals, consider bringing your own utensils. Finally, buying in bulk at grocery stores with bulk sections can save on plastic use if they allow refillable containers. At some grocery stores, you can bring your own containers (be sure to weigh them before filling, so the cashier can adjust the item price). This may not be an option at many grocery stores during the pandemic.

REQUEST PAPER BAGS AT GROCERY STORES

Related to grocery shopping, make sure you limit the amount of waste you generate going to the grocery store. If I am getting groceries delivered or buying groceries myself, I specifically request paper bags or boxes to carry out my groceries in. We used to be able to take reusable bags to the grocery store, but this does not seem to be allowed these days. If you are ordering grocery delivery, be sure to ask your shopper to request paper bags/cartons instead of plastic. Most will be happy to oblige, and you may be able to influence them positively, too!

COMBINE SHIPMENTS, REUSE PACKAGING

I try never to buy items in a piecemeal fashion from online companies. I try to thoughtfully fill my online cart before I hit “purchase” so companies can combine all my shipments. You may also be able to request that the company in general combine your shipments and use paper packaging. It just takes an email or a few minutes of time on live chat. It may not always work, but it is worth a try. If a company cannot combine shipments or reduce waste, I try my best not to order from them. Another related strategy is to strive to buy only “in stock” items from local stores for pick up and request no/little packaging. This could be a way to both support local jobs as well as reduce one’s online shopping packaging footprint.

ZERO WASTE BOX

A Zero Waste box in my home. I use it to recycle plastic packaging, chip bags, candy wrappers, plastic forks, waxed paper containers like ice cream boxes, etc., if I end up using them and/or have been able to collect them to recycle from various places.

LOOK FOR WAYS TO RECYCLE NON-RECYCLABLE WASTE

When all else fails and we have to use non-recyclable items packaging (i.e., chip bags, candy bar wrappers, saran wrap) that we need to throw away, we can look for companies that offer “Zero Waste” services. There is at least one global company named [Terracycle](#) that accepts non-traditionally recyclable waste via mail if you buy a "Zero Waste box" or if one of their free recycling programs meets your needs. You can look them up online. It can be expensive to go this route, though, so definitely focus on reducing first.

For larger items like solar panels, mattresses, household electronics and styrofoam blocks, do some online research. You may be able to find local or online companies who will recycle these items for a fee, for free, or even pay you to recycle them.



It may take some money and effort to find non-traditional recycling routes. But if we don't spend time and effort on our environment, thinking of where our waste goes, and taking care of Mother Nature, we or our children risk possibly not being able to live on Earth any more in 40 years. This is a scary proposition that having money will not fix.

REMEMBER TO RE-USE

Finally, although this article does not focus on reusing, do keep this as a strategy in your toolkit as well. Many products that cannot be recycled can be upcycled into something new. It's worth looking into, to see if someone has already thought of a way to upcycle that item or tuning into your own creativity to see if you can find a way to give that product new life before it meets the landfill.

Reduce before reuse, reuse before recycle, and recycle before landfill, if no other choice, in this order.

As Amma quoted in one of her Satsangs recently, there is a Native American saying that "Only when the last tree has been cut down, the last fish been caught, and the last stream poisoned, will we realize we cannot eat money."

Let us not learn the hard way. Let us spend what is reasonable and within our means to ensure that we and the global family have an Earth to live on, else no amount of money can save us.

**~ DIKSHA,
BETHESDA, MD**

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PARENTS' AND CHILDREN'S CORNER



Romaine lettuce scraps.



GREENFRIENDS WOULD LIKE TO OFFER SUPPORT FOR THE MANY PARENTS WHO ARE WORKING FROM HOME OR HOME-SCHOOLING THEIR CHILDREN DURING THE PANDEMIC.

Here, we provide environmental resources and nature activities to support parents' educational efforts surrounding nature that Amma stresses as so important.

NATURE WALKS & COLLAGING

Taking a short walk in Nature through your neighborhood each morning is a great teacher for noticing new growth and changes in Nature and cultivating an appreciation of our environment. Walking and breathing fresh air is beneficial for health and conducive to focusing the mind for the day's educational studies. Give each child a notebook they can decorate with pictures by collaging or drawing some of their favorite parts of Nature.

Children can write and draw about Nature in their journals. Youth can also collage a Nature box from a used copy paper box to store treasures they find on family Nature walks.

KITCHEN SCRAP GARDEN

A fun activity that can be done any time of the year is creating an indoor kitchen garden in a sunny window from leftover vegetable scraps like the base of a celery stalk, top of beets, carrots, avocado pits, and many more vegetables and fruits.



Beet scraps get new life

This activity allows children to experience our food as being alive after we buy it and introduces them to many ways plants can reproduce. It is exciting for children to discover new sprouts daily and encourages them to experiment with sprouting other vegetables and fruits and start an outdoor garden.

LINKS TO HOW TO START A KITCHEN SCRAP GARDEN:

<https://kidsgardening.org/garden-activities-kitchen-scrap-gardening/>

<https://www.apieceofrainbow.com/vegetables-herbs-regrow-kitchen-scraps/>

<https://www.buzzfeed.com/jesseszewczyk/16-food-scraps-that-you-can-regrow>

NATURE STORY TIME

Find uplifting and inspiring stories about Nature, either in books or magazines or via online storytellers. After children listen to or read the story, give them a 10 minute period to reflect on the story and what it taught them. Let them speak about the lesson they learned or write about it in their journal. We suggest you create a relaxing story time with your children to explore aspects of Nature, listen to and read free stories online, or watch Nature specials.

NATURE AND ECOSYSTEM ACTIVITIES, VIDEOS, AND LESSON PLANS

Parents can involve children in creating Nature lesson plans by giving children choices about the environmental theme for the week or month. Some themes to explore are water, earth, air, insects, birds, humans, animals, plants, trees, growing vegetables and fruits, growth and reproductive cycles and rhythms in nature, climate change, recycling, and pollution.

Online resources for all these are plentiful. If you're stuck for ideas, search online for "nature-themed lesson plans" or "kid's nature sites" and find something that suits you. Let older youth explore links, choose topics, and help create lessons.

HELPFUL LINKS

Kid's gardening and ecosystem activities and lesson plans for all ages:

https://kidsgardening.org/explore-our-resources/?_sfm_content_type=Activity

Kid's environment and kid's health:

<https://kids.niehs.nih.gov/topics/environment-health/index.htm>

Environmental Protection Agency website for kids:

<https://www.epa.gov/students>

The focus of GreenFriends for the last few years has been on source reduction, especially plastic reduction and re-use, and water conservation, which should appeal to older youth. Check out these links:

<https://www.greenfriendsna.org/what2do.html>

<https://www.greenfriendsna.org/srcampaign.html>

<https://www.npr.org/2016/01/19/463084193/how-a-great-teacher-cultivates-veggies-and-kids-in-the-bronx-in-17-photos> <http://www.greenfriendsna.org/chicago.html>

http://www.greenfriendsna.org/turtle_barn.html

We wish you all the best with inspiring and instilling in your children a love and reverence for Nature.

~ ANASWARA,
TURTLE BARN FARM, OKLAHOMA

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