

TIMES EVOKE

BEING AVANT-GARDEN

It's the time of year when around the world, many of us look to gardens to derive delight. After all, with spring comes the vivid blossoming of flowers, the soft, new fabric of velvet grass, the fragrance of verdant shrubs and herbs, literally, the fruits of many a gardener's labours. Indulging in these is no passing fad — indeed, gardens are human beings' most ancient evolutionary transition, the first act of settling down and planting roots. The exercise of gardening reaffirms our primordial bond with nature. Some posit it even reflects a human desire to control the elements. What is certain is the transformative effect gardens have on people as they temporarily leave behind the banal carnival of society for a place of uplifting peace, finding tranquility amidst orderly tangle, being suddenly elevated as a garden is bathed in bewitching twilight, filtering through pink clouds and green leaves.

But are gardens entirely harmonious? Strands of social science now argue these are unfairly enclosed urban spaces, welcoming largely to elites, using but also disregarding the skilled labour of the less privileged — when was the last time we thanked a park gardener for their hard work? Gardens are challenging beings also for the making of these idylls involves taking away the habitation of others — numerous non-human species lose their ground and trees as we uproot grass and plant turf, seed non-native plants and privilege decorative flowers which offer no nurture to insects, birds and bees. Perhaps the garden, seen in this light, is symptomatic of the environmental crisis which typifies the Anthropocene — this is caused by human desire fusing with our short-sightedness, seeking an eternal summer but managing to instead create a paradise that's poised precariously on a cliff.

It is time for us to rethink gardens, as Times Evoke's global experts emphasise. It is important to acknowledge that gardens serve much more than our individual delight. It is still possible to devote such areas in large part to native plants, sustainable systems and the well-being of other species. We need to recognise the need for green escapes is universal — during the pandemic's lockdowns, starting exactly five years ago, spreading rapidly worldwide, visits to gardens by Indians seeking respite rose from 1.8% to 72% — and ensure our gardens embed inclusion and respect. Join Times Evoke in exploring the roots of gardens great and small — and grow an avant-garden yourself.

'History, war and leaders are not humanity's whole story — gardens are our imaginative delight'

Robert P. Harrison is the Rosina Pierotti Professor of Italian Literature at Stanford University. Speaking to Srijana Mitra Das at Times Evoke, he discusses the importance of gardens in human life:

What is the core of your work?
I consider myself a cultural historian whose primary vocation is to think through certain problems and phenomenon that have to do with our human sojourn on Earth.

You write about nature. Many people live and work in high-rises far from the natural world — yet, why do gardens remain so important for humans?

My answer takes the form of a word I coined — this is 'chlorophilia'. There is the concept of biophilia introduced by Edward Wilson and others. Chlorophilia is a kind of biophilia which means human beings having a natural affinity for life forms, including animals, birds, etc. Chlorophilia means the natural and irrevocable human need to be surrounded by green or chlorophyll — in other words, plant life.

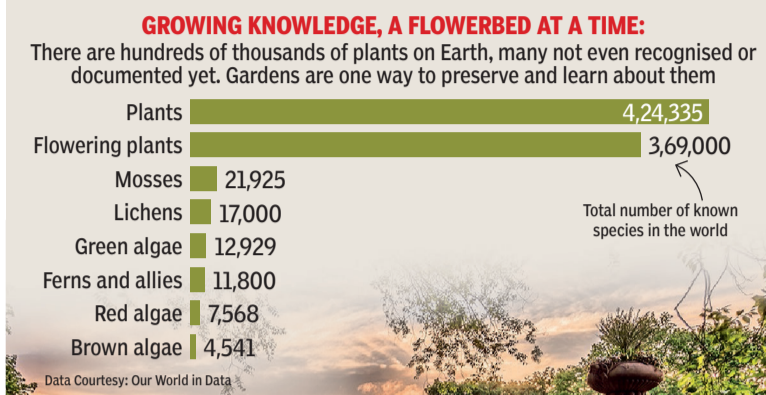
Worldwide, everyone manages to make a window box with plants or a tiny terrace garden. Chlorophilia explains our persistent need for gardens, which are a way of organising our chlorophilic desires in enclosed, delimited spaces within the larger urban world we live in. Perhaps on a block of Wall Street, you'd find people who don't need any green around them — but, once they make enough money, they will move to suburbs which are green and wooded. This idea of the verdant is inbuilt into our human nature. I won't say 'It's in our genes' because I don't believe in genetic reductionism but plenty of evidence confirms our chlorophilia. Gardens are both a manifestation and continuation of that — they are a certain kind of aesthetic transfiguration of this human tendency.

People imagine history as wars, vaccines and politics — why do you write 'History without gardens would be a wasteland'?

That is in part related to chlorophilia.



TAJ LTD: These gardens were once private



History is a story we are thrown into — but it's not the whole story of who we are. As TS Eliot wrote, humankind can't bear very much reality. That is not a fault in us — reality is only one of the dimensions within which we carry on our lives. We have a public sphere, which is with wars and history, with wars and leaders, takes place. But if we didn't have a private sphere, we would collapse. Gardens represent sanctuaries from the harsh light of reality. They are refuges where one can reconnect with one's aesthetic pleasures, imaginative needs and the fantastical. They are islands where one can dream a reverie in a reconnection with the natural world. I do think history would be a wasteland if we were to lose gardens — I also believe New York City would go insane if it did not have Central Park within it.

an aristocracy. With that sort of wealth came the luxury of being able to create gardens of delight for the pleasure of royalty or nobility. However, what is so remarkable about the age we live in now is the democratisation of what used to be the exclusive privilege of the rich and powerful — one of the blessings of the modern city is how many of these older, exclusive gardens have become public spaces. The Jardin du Luxembourg in Paris is now open to all citizens. People jog there, play tennis or visit cafes. The same is true for the English Garden in Munich, a vast place where people congregate in the summer, walk around the greens or swim in its rivers — all that used to be private, belonging to exalted families. The Villa Borghese in Rome, once a huge private garden of the Borghese family, is now open to the public.

MAGIC SEEDS

In the broader context of the environmental crisis, did gardens also all humans into imagining they could control nature?
I would say to the contrary. Gardens — even though there is a certain imposition of order on nature within them — have always kept alive this idea that our planet and biosphere were, or should be, a kind of garden of Eden. I've written

Don't grand gardens also reflect the appropriation, sometimes violently, of people's land, labour, even the area other species inhabited?

No doubt. The history of gardens shows they are almost invariably associated with elitism and the aristocratic classes. This is true of the West but there are many instances — the Taj Mahal and its gardens were meant for

about how Earth as a whole is a prodigious garden — the ecological lesson gardens teach us is that the gardener has a vocation of care which is behind the cultivation and constant nourishing of a garden. The more we understand Earth as a garden that calls for our curation and efforts, the better off we'll be.

Can you tell us about the gardens made by homeless people in America?

Where you have this large urban wilderness, to find these little pockets of order created by homeless people raises questions. You ask, why would a homeless person, who needs things for biological survival, create what would appear to be a superfluous aesthetic pocket? I speculate this has to do with providing a kind of orientation within the disorientation of the urban sprawl. Such a garden also makes a statement — 'This space has been made by someone'. That homeless garden becomes a speech act, a silent one, expressing how this is something that's been made by a human being with a spiritual need for sanctuary and to be heard, to not be completely silenced in the public world, to be able to say, 'I am here'. Their creators converse with the world through these gardens. They maintain a voice in the public sphere. Having this is as important as it is to eat, survive and find shelter.

Is there a contemporary garden that particularly interests you?

I recently visited Houston, the huge metropolis. There is an immense Memorial Park there which is larger than Central Park. It had been extremely degraded but a landscape architecture firm were commissioned to rehabilitate Eastern Glades, one part of it. This visit made a profound impression on me. I learnt of all the disfigurements that had been visited upon this area — it was paved to make parking lots, buildings were constructed there and so on. The firm had quietly removed all these overlays of urban forces and planted native



EXIST: 'Homeless gardens' reflect being

PAINTING A PARK...

Impressionist painter **Claude Monet's** art lay embedded in gardens. While he painted soft dahlias, antirrhinums, sweet peas, pansies and irises, all in perfect harmony, he also passionately tended his own garden in Giverny, France. **Monet grew a flower garden and a Japanese water garden**, both echoing in his 19th century paintings, tranquil pastels with a sudden surprise of shimmering water, crowned by a philosophical bridge



Salvador Dalí's surrealist art was famous for its heretical view of the world, expressed in melting clocks, elongated eggs and blurry keys. Dalí painted in turbulent times, drawing from violent **World Wars, nuclear weapons, the human subconscious and new technologies**. His drawings of gardens were his **most tranquil**, showing humans bowing before towering roses, lilies growing out of gramophone records and **sunflowers — bearing breakfasts** in trademark Dalí style



The modern Indian artist **Amrita Sher-Gill** painted meticulous scenes of an **unseen India**, spanning lively peasant women in the hills to quiet, saintly figures in the south. However, **her painting of a garden echoes purity** — a white table sits in an olive-green background, with red apples on it, a small house behind. Perhaps she pointed to the **peace nature offers** those content to stay simple



Research: Smithsonian Magazine, Encyclopaedia Britannica, Sotheby's, National Gallery of Modern Art (NGMA)

species, designed waterways using sustainable irrigation, etc. Visiting this park gave me hope that in the Anthropocene, this geological era where humans have left their imprint on everything in nature, it could still be possible to undo the damage and devastation wreaked on our environments. I saw an area full of harmony, with sustainable systems of plantation, native trees, etc. This was a living proof of how, if we give ourselves over to the vocation of care with seriousness, we can actually heal and rehabilitate our lived environments — it was almost like a little resurrection.

NATURE'S GARDENERS
Humans are not the only species interested in making gardens — these wouldn't even exist without the effort of the **little worm**. **Composting worms process organic matter in soil**, turning this into nutrients for plants, while **earthmoving worms aerate the ground**, creating tunnels that transport water and air through solid earth to plants. **You might not like the looks of a worm — but they make the most beautiful places possible**



Leaf-cutter ants are perhaps the **world's oldest gardeners** — dating 12 million evolutionary years (humans are only 6 million years old), they live in underground nests which extend over 6,500 square feet. **They forage and cut off bits of leaves, haul these to their nest, giving these to minims** — specialists who turn these into mulch to nourish fungi in a green space. That is eaten by the **queen ant**, who also lives inside this extraordinary garden



Butterflies are loved universally for their beauty — but they are also brainy gardeners. Flitting from flower to flower, **they get coated in pollen and help carry this across plants, aiding proliferation**. This produces abundant fields — pollinators like butterflies **generate one out of every three bites of food we eat** — and wondrous gardens, further protected by butterflies. **These may look placid but many eat aphids which damage plants**



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'Gardens reflected a human desire to dominate nature and the vulnerable — many parks move away from that today'

Chandra Mukerji is Professor Emerita of Communication and Science Studies at the University of California, San Diego. Speaking to Times Evoke, she outlines the power dynamics often embedded in great gardens:

Chandra Mukerji sits against a backdrop of floor-to-ceiling wooden bookshelves, crammed with volumes. That itself is not unusual these days — every television debate features undoubtedly erudite speakers framed against heaving libraries. But what gives away her constant use of the books is their untidy stacking, evidence of being reached for, read and put back frequently and haphazardly, near a French window from where light — and perhaps the green of a garden — streams in.

Describing her work, Mukerji says, 'I'm interested in the built environment, in how humans changing and reconstructing the landscape creates relations of power and the material memory embedded in landscapes when people use them.' Her writing on the great gardens of Versailles, created by Louis XIV, the 'Sun King' who ruled France for over 70 years until 1715, thus delves not into the aesthetics of this vast expanse but its often brutal power relations.

The economics of the times were one such equation. A trade in luxury flowers came about before capitalism emerged. There was the famous tulip trade, with these flowers becoming a very important object of desire across Europe, indeed, a great fad — people would spend huge sums to possess rare bulbs and blooms from faraway places. This became part of a collector's culture which grew within a consumer society for luxury goods. But, Mukerji highlights, 'In the 17th century,



ATTENTION! Trees in Versailles stand to order



FROM IMPERIAL TO NATURAL: The Versailles garden (L), with its geometry and military motifs, reflected a desire to dominate land, labour and the environment — India's national parks, like Ranthambore (R), devoted to the welfare of non-human species, pose a remarkable contrast

you also begin to get landscapes which are places for displaying the kinds of global reach and forms of power that hadn't existed previously. These were driven partly by a European impulse for botany and to collect bulbs and seeds. This stemmed from a religious view too that all the scattered plants of the Garden of Eden had to be collected again. So, there was this confluence of a moral justification for collecting plants and an economic opportunity to create profit which intersected in the 17th century — French and English gardens thus became these all-encompassing environments that were celebrations of wealth and religious passion.'

Alongside, seemingly tranquil gardens and violent militarism grew intertwined. 'French gardens were displays of military capacity and power, more than anything else — they were engineered with the techniques of fortress engineering, their topiary across the walls resembling guards atop a fort. Even the statues in Versailles, which represented the rivers of France, were displays of cannon-making finesse, made by the famous cannon-making Keller brothers and signed by them and not an artist.'

Military prowess was meant to dominate land and hence, as Mukerji says,

'One of the characteristics of these gardens is the formality, the geometrical structure of its different parts. This reflected the capacity for land control and the ability to govern. This claim was very important to Louis XIV because he wanted to express his sovereignty as king over the people of France and French territory. Making a very well-controlled garden was a way of showing his ability.'

Alongside the regal, the imperial and the military was also the need for tranquility. 'Making the Versailles gardens beautiful, abundant with flowers and full of peace was very important,' Mukerji emphasises. Louis XIV took power after many bitter wars were fought over religion and so, a peaceful place was an expression of the use of military force to end conflicts and create serenity. But the theme of control ran relentlessly across Versailles. 'The kitchen garden was designed by Jean-Baptiste de La Quintinie. He was an intellectual who argued great men in history always took an interest in gardens because they understood that to manage their lands, they had to understand both botany and court culture. This became typical of great leaders.'

Importantly, another hallmark of a 'great leader' became the ability to twist and turn botany itself. As Mukerji

remarks, 'Louis XIV was actually allergic to many plants. So, Versailles specialised in citrus trees and its curators forced these to bloom at different times of the year — that was another expression of control, the ability to decide when plants would fruit and flower and have a continuous amount of fresh produce and blooms in northern Europe's ecology.'

The 'Sun King' also knew the importance of dominating people — Versailles embodied this, Mukerji outlines. 'There is also the exploitation of people embedded in these great European gardens. These were products of peasant culture and labour that created beauty and wonder. Kings and princes didn't know how to



BY COMMAND: Can blooming be controlled?

garden' — she smiles wryly, 'Peasants did this for them. These systems of control pre-existed the garden but were implicit in the ways they developed. There is this very interesting pattern at the beginning of state formation and capitalism where this knowledge, which was rural and treated otherwise as 'worthless', became central to the production of luxury, the creation of great gardens, palaces and regal infrastructure, all of which helped regimes of power control their landscapes. There was an inversion in which the most powerful knowledge belonged to the least powerful people — in some ways, the history of that period is of trying to extract that knowledge without allowing the people who had it to gain any power that came out of those extractions.'

These tendencies mirrored both the strengths — and weaknesses — of human beings, Mukerji says. 'One of the characteristics of humans is that we try to control nature to our advantage — we are good with tools and can do a certain amount of reasoning. So, there's a capacity within the human species to change the environment to make it work for us rather than be subject to it since we are basically very vulnerable creatures. But that impulse has had all these consequences for the environment because we don't leave things alone. We change them for better or worse, often to benefit not all humans but a few. These impulses have had magnificent effects in gardens and terrible effects manifest in pollution, damaged ecosystems and the relentless exploitation of resources.'

Today, however, Mukerji finds changes taking place in the idea of gardens, once reflecting the human will to dominate nature. 'I am very interested in parks now — the effort to protect nature and create wild landscapes is a very important turn in history. It moves away from a world where people and labour were exploited and controlled. Of course, there are fears about technology controlling the world now but for me, parks and wild nature become a counterpoint to a surveillance society, displaying our yearning still for a natural foundation for the human spirit. That takes on a very different meaning from the old great gardens. The idea of a human being is diminished here. Although humans still control the landscape, they become a small spot in this vast expanse, rather than a big fancy king in a garden. Studying the natural park movement — particularly in the Global South today — would be fascinating.'

READERS WRITE

Dear Times Evoke, TE's article about signalling among animals (23rd March) was such a refreshing read! A truly absorbing interview with Professor Stephen Nowicki from Duke University. It's a joy to hear all the diverse bird calls around us and see peacocks spread their resplendent trains to impress peahens! This article was truly fascinating!
— **Dr Monisha Thomas, Delhi**

It was very good to read about animal signalling in TE. Our biodiversity is so unique that it almost seems ethereal. So many birds in my vicinity make different sounds at different times. I wonder what they are communicating. It is also heart-breaking to see how our human actions have impacted these creatures. These beautiful, sentient beings make our surroundings flourish. Yet, we care so little about them. Thank you, TE, for bringing awareness to us — that is the first step to widen our limited perceptions of nature.
— **Ramsha Ali, Kolkata**

What a wonderful article about animal signalling, TE! This was beautifully presented and every example, peacocks to white-crowned sparrows, was fascinating. I never knew the train of peacocks signified so much information — nature also provides its own unique ID!
— **Amit Khandelwal, Mumbai**

Thanks, TE, for a truly riveting discussion with Stephen Nowicki on animal communication. Through their signalling, animals remain honest and reliable about their health, upbringing, potential parental care abilities, etc. We humans would do well to learn from them because it is how nature intended all species to exist. Thank you for an excellent article, TE.
— **V. Mohan Raghunathan, Chennai**

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