



DISPATCH 001 – Trip to the Garden

We are overjoyed to welcome so many of you back to Ishtar's Network of Feral Gardens this second cycle and to meet so many new members. With the spring, Ishtar once again rises from the underworld and reminds us of the enduring persistence and interconnectedness of life, amidst the disorientation of grief and loss. In the first year of the network, Ishtar's presence helped many of us navigate the isolation of the first lockdown, and more intimately connect with these cycles of growth and hibernation. Since then, we've all ridden waves of discombobulation and confusion, grappling with the gravity of the moment with our thinking minds. Invoking Ishtar's wisdom, rather than trying to overcome these feelings we are opening up our other senses and the embodied knowledge that we carry borne out of our entanglements with the natural world.

Perhaps you too share our sense of trepidation, the uncertainty of whether your hard work tilling the soil, sowing seeds, patiently watering and tending and waiting will yield fruit. Perhaps you are also navigating the effects of illness, exhaustion, and perhaps even a certain sense of helplessness as the world seems to careen from one catastrophe to another. To accompany us in wading through these confusions, we turn to the work of feminist historian, cultural critic, contemplative writer & filmmaker Lata Mani, whose texts we will feature in these dispatches throughout the summer.

Hoping to deepen the lessons we have learned in the first cycle, we remain committed to this magnificent adventure. This Milk Moon, a ragtag group of SAVAC community members with varied experience in gardening joined hands to fumble joyously to prepare our shared plot. In this process, we remembered how to connect with our sensing bodies and allow them to guide us toward noticing that which can so often be drowned out in the din of the everyday. Like Lata Mani in her garden sojourn, we had to take to heart the idea that, "what is important is the doing, just the doing, just the attempt to do, just the planning to do; not finishing, but trying."

Ishtar's International Network of Feral Gardens is a playful, experimental food sovereignty initiative. Dedicated to encouraging the cultivation of feral gardens and building an international artists network of out-of-the-box food systems, Ishtar's International Network of Feral Gardens is a long-term project that opens up new economies for growing, sharing and eating food. Playing with the discursive tensions between the wild (feral) and the domestic (garden), the Network invites artists, curators and cultural workers with thoughtful seeds, unusual tools, and ancestral intelligence to conjure up atypical spaces for cultivating fruits, vegetables, herbs and medicinal plants.

Lata Mani, "Trip to the Garden," *Interweaves: Ruminations on Illness and Spiritual Life*, New Delhi: Yoda Press, 2011

It is a midsummer, weekday morning. I have just spent twenty minutes in the garden, which is a big accomplishment for me! It took a little more than an hour of meditation, followed by porridge eaten in silence, two aspirins and the refusal to answer an engaging phone call (for I knew it would be either a five minute phone conversation or a little time in the garden) to prepare me to go out. So you can imagine that when I finally put on my sun hat and dark glasses and stepped out onto the porch it was a regal exiting.

I went slowly down the stairs. Suddenly, I heard a bone rattling, blood curdling sound. It was Ruth listening to music. I turned around and climbed up the steps and reminded her that I had not died, merely gone into the garden and that she could not possibly play such music if she expected me to survive! She laughed, turned it off and waved me on. I began my descent once again, this time more limply.

The first thing I saw was an extraordinary spider's web, the spider still at work spinning it. It was perhaps three feet wide, strung from the stilts of the house to the arching branch of the camellia tree. The light was such that I should have wished to photograph it, it would have been perfect. So often, spiders' webs only glint when backlit and it can be quite difficult to get the sun behind one and at the right angle. Not so this web. I stood and looked at the beautiful creature weaving its web of spittle, aware that despite the artistry, I could easily walk into it a mere 3 minutes later, and it would be a frond on my nose or ear, that I would curl up and discard perhaps even without a thought.

I picked up a plastic chair and sat before the coreopsis plant, conscious that I would have to bend quite low to remove the faded blossoms. I started chanting my mantra, which is my favorite thing to do when I am doing things that do not require continuous thinking. I had to stop after removing every four or five dead blooms, lean back in the chair and look up. I had to take care in doing this. If I tilted my head too far back the sun would be in my eye. My body ached and groaned each time I bent forward. In an effort to be mindful I stood up and walked a little, wondering if there was something I could do whilst standing. The bougainvillea had a couple of unhealthy branches. I snipped them off parallel to the main stalk.

I returned to the chair and saw that there were a few flowers still left to deadhead, but I was unsure I could do them. I am trying to train myself out of the feeling that a task is only done well when it is completed. I wish to take to heart the idea that what is important is the doing, just the doing, just the attempt to do, just the planning to do; not finishing, but trying. I looked again and saw that there were only three flowers remaining. "You can do this!" I said to myself, and gathered them. I placed them in a bag with all the clippings.

I moved my chair into the shade thinking that perhaps if I sat still, I may get another lease on life another ten minutes in the garden. But as I sat down, I realized that my body really needed to be flat and well supported. So I made my journey back up the stairs, aided by Ruth who had interrupted her chores to take a break with me. She knows only too well by now that I won't be

at any task for any length of time. We came up the stairs, I took off my garden shoes and settled back into bed.

I wish to say how majestic this adventure has been, the preparation to be in the garden, the time spent outside, the satisfaction I feel with this morning's expedition. It has been weeks since I have been able to step out of doors. I am grateful to my body for soldiering on so willingly and to the spiritual teaching that means that I am no longer tempted by the folly of believing that a task is only done when it is completed. For these and other grand mercies I remain eternally beholden and forever thankful to the sacrifice of body, the openness of heart, and the surrender of mind.

Lata Mani is a feminist historian, cultural critic, contemplative writer & filmmaker.

She has published books and articles on a broad range of issues, from feminism and colonialism, to illness, spiritual philosophy and contemporary politics. She is the author of *The Integral Nature of Things: Critical Reflections on the Present* (Routledge, 2013), *Interleaves: Ruminations on Illness and Spiritual Life* (Yoda, 2011), *Sacred Secular: Contemplative Cultural Critique* (Routledge, 2009), and *Contentious Traditions: The Debate on Sati in Colonial India* (University of California Press, 1989). She is the director of the film, *Leela's Journey* (2009).

She was on the faculty of Women's Studies at the University of California, Davis, when a head injury in 1993 catapulted her into the world of illness and disability. This experience inaugurated a new phase of physical, intellectual and spiritual transformation, deepening previous commitments to social justice in unanticipated ways. Since then her writing has drawn on secular as well as contemplative frameworks in addressing pressing sociocultural issues. In the past decade, in collaborations with Nicolás Grandi, she has allowed herself the pleasure of moving beyond text to video and transmedia experiments. Her book *Myriad Intimacies* (comprising essays, poems and six videos co-created with Nicolás Grandi) is forthcoming from Duke University Press in 2022.

FIELD NOTES

In every dispatch this summer, we will be featuring the work of our members. Ponni Arasu has been a member of Ishtar's Network of Feral Gardens since its first iteration. Ponni has been cultivating a feral garden in Batticaloa, Sri Lanka, amidst the worsening economic and humanitarian conditions precipitated by the Sri Lankan Civil War. In the first year, she shared with us the difficulty of sourcing seeds under the economic conditions created by the government's Structural Adjustment Programs.

Now the country is on the brink of political and economic collapse and food shortages are rampant. A lack of civic infrastructure due to the war has led to an accumulation of garbage which makes the land less arable. Ponni has been planting cassava or manioc plants, a local staple food, to adhere to industrial refuse, slowly pulling it out of the ground, creating room for other vegetables like Malabar spinach to set root and climb up the cassava's sturdy stalks. Holding all that has happened on this soil, Ponni nevertheless

anchors herself in the faith that she is, “growing something to make the soil, and thus by extension the people and all the other creatures healthier.”

To view excerpts from the video please follow the links by clicking on the thumbnail images.



