VRIKSHA VALLI

AN INDIGENOUS BIODIVERSITY GARDEN

This specially curated garden with over 200 native plant species has been created in collaboration with the Chhatrapati Shivaji Maharaj Vastu Sangrahalaya (CSMVS), the Centre for Environmental Research & Education (CERE) and the H T Parekh Foundation honouring India's rich biodiversity.

The garden, which is divided into five thematic areas including *Historical, Medicinal, Vertical, Kitchen, and Butterfly*, aims to promote respect for and protection of the environment. The term *"Vriksha Valli"* comes from a well-known devotional *abhang* written by the Marathi poet Sant Tukaram Maharaj in the 17th century, in which he refers to animals, creepers, and plants as "man's relatives."



On May 6, 2023, Mr. Deepak S. Parekh, Chairman, HDFC Limited, gave Vriksha Valli its official opening and it has been accessible to the general public since then. It has already caught the attention of visitors who have been spending much time in the garden to understand the pivotal roles that plants play in our lives. The garden is a rich reserve for botanists, nature enthusiasts, students as well as photographers, who can spot uncommon species of birds, butterflies and other creatures that the plants have attracted.

THE MUSEUM CSMVS MUMBAI | 101 – YEARS –

CENTRE FOR ENVIRONMENTAL RESEARCH AND EDUCATION

HT Parekh FOUNDATION

The Times of India and the Mid-day have carried feature stories on Vriksha Valli, as appended below

Rare, native plants take root at museum's new botanical garden

Sharmila.Ganesan
@timesgroup.com



The newly sprouted Vriksha Valli boasts 200 species of plants

What brought Vasco Da Gama to Kerala in 1498? Why did 363 women of Rajasthan sacrifice their lives in 1730? Which sweet craving made the Mughals stay on in India? How did Mumbai become a commercial capital? Answers to such botanical questions can now be found growing non-chronologically outside the Chhatrapati Shivaji Maharaj Vastu Sangrahalaya (CSMVS) museum.

Vriksha Valli, the museum's newly-sprouted native biodiversity garden boasts 200 species of indigenous plants of Maharashtra and its surrounding regions that are rare to find in rabidly-concretizing Mumbai. Apart from pepper, khejri, mango and cotton—the short answers to the four aforementioned questions—the drip-irrigated micro-forest includes sandalwood, mahua, dhup, agarwood, ganglia and indigo which silently introduce themselves to visitors in two languages.

A brainchild of CSMVS and the HT Parekh Foundation, Vriksha Valli—a 400-sq-metre sprawl bearing signboards in English and Marathi—borrows its name from an abhang in which 17th-century poet Sant Tukaram Maharaj describes plants, creepers, and animals as "man's relatives". "Native plants play a unique role in rejuvenating local biodiversity," says Sabyasachi Mukherjee, director general of CSMVS who, along with Zia Lalkaka, CEO of HT Parekh Foundation, mooted the idea of a self-sustaining homegrown biodiversity garden last year.

"Having evolved over millennia in a specific region, these plants support local varieties of insects, birds and animals that are dependent on them for food and shelter, supporting an entire ecosystem of a region," says Mukherjee, whose initiative enlisted the Centre for Environmental Research and Education (CERE) which had created native biodiversity gardens in Mumbai, Pune, Alibaug and Bangalore.

Also meant to make both biology and history come alive, the garden boasts 7000 carefully-picked plants with a selfie spot in the centre. CERE designed the garden with five sections Historical, Medicinal, Kitchen & Spice, Butterfly and Vertical, the last one a tightly-packed upright green frame that's intended to improve air quality while serving as a sound barrier.

Even as saplings were picked up from plant nurseries across Maharashtra, Gujarat and Karnataka apart from private collectors, ecologist Rashneh Pardiwala of CERE carried three large tea plants as hand luggage on her flight back to Mumbai from a field visit in Assam. Many prototypes were made before a Delhi-based sculptor handcrafted each of the installations that depict various seed dispersal techniques ranging from lotus seed pods which are dispersed by water to flying seed pods.

Work at the site began in November last year. By April, the garden was ready. In the meantime, members of the museum's longtime gardening team were busy digging, planting, watering and layering the soil with earthworms when curiosity drove visitors to them. Some asked what was up, some offered to donate their house plants to the garden.

"I have a rare insectivorous plant that I could contribute," said one gentleman, "but alas it is an exotic species from Singapore."

On May 6, the curated native micro-forest opened with an internal pathway to the public. Over the last two weeks, more than 30,000 visitors have seen the garden lush with trivia spanning the gamut from Madhubani painters who used colours extracted from plants to the Taj Mahal which has 46 flowers embedded in its marble.

"The entire spectrum of architecture, paintings, sculpture, coins, monuments and literature is replete with depictions of plants in varied forms and styles," says Joyoti Roy of CSMVS who has not read or heard of any other initiative linking artefacts inside a museum to the plants in the garden outside it. "Visitors can draw connections between nature and history," says Roy citing pepper, the "black gold" that had lured European seafarers to India.

Soon, the museum will be developing various educational activities based on the biodiversity garden to help school students. "Most of our citizens are not aware of how many plants and animals are endemic to India," says Pardiwala. "We are not aware of how to conserve plants and animals that are vulnerable and may soon be lost forever," says Roy of CSMVS, which boasts deliberate puddles in the butterfly section where Citrus medica, a lemon plant, is playing host to freshly-laid eggs.

Read the article

History goes green

Vriksha Valli is a new initiative located at CSMVS that will reintroduce visitors to India's rich history and culture by using rare plants as live educational tools





(Left) The gigantic **Taro leaves** are used to make the Gujarati delicacy, patra; (right) **Hadjod**, which looks like human joints, is used to heal fractures. It is known to reduce the pain and inflammation of joints



Life-size installations set up across the garden aim to educate visitors about the process and the importance of pollination

DEVANSHI DOSHI
theguide@mid-day.com

DO you know how many species of plants can be found in the inlay of the Taj Mahal in Agra?" It is the first question that Kitayun Rustom, co-founder of CERE (Centre for Environmental Research and Education), asks us when we meet her at the Chhatrapati Shivaji Maharaj Vastu Sangrahalaya (CSMVS). It is high noon but the harsh sun barely reaches us, thanks to the canopy of trees. Two cattle egrets take a walk on the adjoining heritage garden.

"There are 46 species of plants here. Not many are aware of this," she informs, adding, "History didn't begin with humans, but with plants." The Vriksha Valli is an addition to the green museum initiatives by CSMVS for which they have partnered with CERE and HT Parekh Foundation. This 400 square metre stretch of the biodiversity garden showcases over 200 species of plants, each backed by history or a purpose.

It is divided into five sections, beginning with the historical garden, followed by the medicinal garden, vertical garden, kitchen garden, and finally, the butterfly garden. "The history of plants defines how we interact today as individuals and as a community. By introducing the Vriksha Valli, we're resetting history in the right order," she signs off.

ENVIRONMENT

AT CSMVS, Fort.
TIME 10.30am onwards
ENTRY ₹150 (for adults), ₹35 (for children)



Flowers like **firecrackers** are installed in the butterfly garden to attract fauna, especially butterflies



The garden is located in the foreground of the CSMVS museum building. PICS/SAMEER MARKANDE



Black pepper, once considered gold, was available only in parts of South Asia. Vasco Da Gama arrived at Kerala's shores from Portugal in search of the spice. He was soon followed by other European powers. Their quest for spices led to the eventual colonisation of India



After giving Bombay, as it was known then, to Catherine of Braganza as part of dowry for her marriage to King Charles II, the British established their own weaving mills and exported only **raw cotton** from India. This led to the boycott of British-made cloth by Mahatma Gandhi



Visitors check out the biodiversity garden

Read the article



Historical Garden

Throughout Indian history from the ancient civilizations to the present day, plants have been an integral part of Indian lives since they have provided us with food, shelter, clothing, fuel and medicine and also shaped our art and culture and enriched our economy. The entire spectrum of architecture, paintings, sculpture, coins, monuments and literature is replete with depictions of plants in varied forms and styles. This section of the garden highlights some notable examples of plants through Indian history which can also be seen within the Museum artefacts.

Butterfly Garden



Butterflies are colourful insects that play a vital role in the food chain and their presence signifies a healthy ecosystem. India is blessed with a rich diversity of over 1500 species of butterflies. Butterflies require nectar plants for food and host plants to lay their eggs on and for their caterpillars to grow. They need a pesticide free environment and tiny mud pools for their daily dose of salt and minerals. To help increase butterflies you can create small "Butterfly Gardens" on your balconies and terraces.

Vertical Garden



Vertical gardens have many plants packed closely together on upright frames. A boon in urban spaces as they form beautiful natural screens that help improve air quality and serve as a sound barrier. This vertical garden contains plants from the butterfly, medicinal, kitchen and historical garden sections. Click a 'Selfie' with our vertical garden and take home a memory of your visit.

Kitchen Garden



In a kitchen garden, one can grow spices, leafy vegetables, fruits, tubers, herbs, grains and flowers. These gardens can be set up on your balcony, window sill or any open space. A spice is a dried seed, fruit, root, flower, bark or any other part of a plant that is used for flavouring, colouring or preserving food. Over 70% of the world's spices come from India making it the "Spice Capital of the World". This Kitchen Garden has a wide array of plants of edible use and spices.

Medicinal Garden

More than two-thirds of the world's plant species are estimated to have medicinal value and the use of plants for medical treatment is believed to have started over 60,000 years ago. Ayurveda which is the ancient Indian system of medicine relies mostly on plants for treatment. Even in modern medicine it is estimated that 7000 medicinal compounds are derived from plants. This garden has a host of medicinal species to highlight the importance of plants in maintaining human health

