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BACK TO THE ROOTS
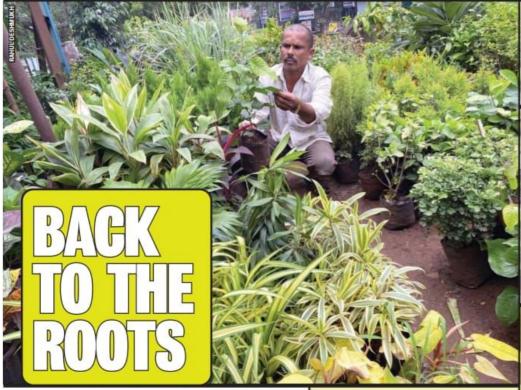
Come monsoon and we are excited about planting new trees, but seldom do we think about which variety and species is best for our neighbourhood and city's biodiversity

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The period between June and September — when it is monsoon in India — is considered to be the best time to plant trees in India. Several regions see a rise in tree plantation drives, all aimed at beautifying the neighbourhood. Have you ever wondered if there was a right and wrong tree to plant? Should you focus on planting trees that flower and sit pretty or those that help replenish the soil and environment, but might not be pretty to look at? Is there a tree that can do both?

Over a complicated jargon-filled call with ecologist Ketaki Ghate, Mirror brings to you a simple guide on what to plant and what to stay away from as you do your bit for the environment.

Go to basics

India has close to 18,500 species of flowering plants but only a few are used for plantations. Ghate suggests one should first understand the soil, get the basic knowledge of the species in relation to that region's biodiversity and ascertain how much maintenance you are able to do for the plants.

"Plantation should always be done specifically to your region and condition of the soil. In Maharashtra, plant species change as per rainfall. Plants in Konkan are a little different from that of Khandesh. The soil, too, must be alive enough to sustain plantations. If you choose completely barren, non-protected land for plantations, you must protect it first from grazing animals and fire. Only then will it restore its fertility and then do plantations of the right species," Ghate explains.

Ghate is the co-founder of Oikos, which provides ecological services and has been working in the field of restoration, plantation and propagation of native plants for two decades.

Watering the saplings is also crucial at least for an initial two to three years. Keeping this in mind, land should be selected based on the availability of water and irrigation facilities as well, she says.

Always pick native

More often than not, when plantation drives are undertaken, the focus is beautification, hence a lot of flowering non-native plants get planted. As a result, cities like Pune have mostly all non-natives planted along roads or in parks.

"There is great diversity amongst native trees. There are beautifully blossoming species you can put in parks, evergreen trees that give shade can be planted along the roadside, and very specific plants like Umbar, Karanj, Walunj i.e. willow tree, etc., should be planted along rivers and streams. Few non-native plants like Subabhul, Australian Acaandcia, Gliricidia must be completely avoided as they become invasive i.e. they spread very fast and suppress native vegetation. Though a few non-natives are preferred by birds, it is better to avoid those in mass plantation drives in natural areas," Ghate stresses.

Your plantation drive checklist

- Learn about your region and its biodiversity
- Check status of land and soil
- Protect the land with fences and hedge
- Pick native plants that will help conserve soil and attract biodiversity
- Maintenance after planting is crucial too

Five exotic trees to avoid

- Eucalyptus
- Subabhul
- Gliricidia
- Australian Acacia
- Peltophorum

Blossoming native trees

- Bahava — Cassia fistula
- Pangara — Erythrina suberosa
- Palas — Butea monosperma
- Sawar — Bombax malabaricum
- Tamhan — Lagerstroemia speciosa

Old is gold

- In June 2021, the Pune Municipal Corporation declared 25 trees in Pune city as heritage trees based on their historical, botanical and ecological significance.
- Pimple and Chapha trees at Parvati temple complex — 250 and 300 years old respectively
- Wad — Ficus benghalensis or Banyan Fig inside Pune university — is 125 to 150 years old.
- Gorakhchinch tree at Abhinav chowk on Tilak road — 130 years old

10 trees to plant on tekdis: Should be planted sparsely

- Acacias — Babhul, Hivar, Khair
- Bel — Aegle marmelos
- Pangara — Erythrina suberosa
- Moi — Lannea coromandelica
- Salai — Boswellia serrata
- Medhshingi — Dolichandrone falcata
- Dhawada — Anogeissus latifolia
- Palas — Butea monosperma
- Pimpal — Ficus religiosa
- Nandruk — Ficus retusa

10 biodiversity-friendly shrubs and trees for your terrace/garden

- Adulasa
- Curryleaf
- Rattle pod — Dingala
- Milkweed — Rui
- Butterfly bush
- Murudsheng
- Nirgudi
- Ranjai — Clematis
- Sonchapha
- All Ficus / Wild figs like Banyan, Pimpal, Pipar etc.

Evergreen native trees

- Amba (Mango) — Mangifera indica
- Jambhul — Syzygium cumini
- Sonchapha — Magnolia champaca
- Phanas (Jackfruit) — Artocarpus heterophyllus
- Bakul — Mimusops elengi