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Garden musings

Is there a big-picture solution to a garden variety conundrum?

THE luscious rain is making my garden grow. With gallons of fresh water, everything is flourishing. From weeds to plants, all reveal their gluttony in leaping up unabashedly, eager to snatch the rare rays of sunshine.

New leaves, tiny shoots, and flower buds, the plants in my balcony garden have shot up a couple of centimetres in the last two weeks. I can hardly keep up the weeding, pruning and general sprucing up that's required of a limited garden space.

However, along with the proliferation of lush foliage and fresh flowers, other aspects of the gardening world have also crept in to take root. The damp is becoming an issue, with wet bougainvillea flowers and dead leaves adding an extra layer of moisture to the tops of plants, trees and pots.

This clammy environment is one of nature's ways of preparing a breeding ground for yet another set of grouches. Slugs and snails, the bane of my gardening life, take particular pleasure in seeking out these dank spaces to further increase their numbers in their bid to take over my patch, leaving a regurgitated garden in their wake.

With my first mug of coffee steaming on the wooden table, half asleep, I scrutinise the pots for signs of these errant itinerants. All methods of disposing of them have turned out ineffectual, so I still resort to physically removing them from my little plot.

That was when I took in, unexpectedly, a new conundrum.

I am valiantly trying to raise a

flame of the forest. Yes, I know. It will eventually become a tree, up to 20m high, and might take up to 30 years to reach its full potential. But right now it's a glimpse of that future: little plant in a small pot, taking up a fraction of the space on a cultivated, ground-floor balcony. I like trees, and I have a couple of others in larger pots, each offering its own strategy of stillness in my private sanctuary. And I place much faith in this sanguine Greek proverb: "A society grows great when old men plant trees whose shade they shall never sit in." So stick with me.

A society grows great when old men plant trees whose shade they know they shall never sit in.
– Greek proverb

Back to my flame of the forest, scientifically known as *Delonix regia*, a native of Madagascar. I wasn't planning to buy one when I saw it in the flower nursery. Sitting forlornly in a tattered black plastic bag, though, it looked as if it was longing for a home. Furthermore, a spray of scarlet flames lit up the top of the tiny tree, burning brightly to cover its delicately fine foliage. The cluster of showy petals was a canopy of tiny orange-to-crimson blooms.

So I took it home. This tree is my current pet, although I try not to pick favourites from among my green charges. Like all amateur gardeners, I've had plants die on me during deadlines, extended trips, and protracted dry seasons. I do want this one to make it. I've placed it close to my outdoor table so I can keep an eye on it.

What a pleasure that's turned out to be. So far, it's bloomed three times and produced one large seed pod. Initially, I was concerned with the leaves it was shedding. Sometimes the tiny branches take turns; occasionally, to my initial consternation, all at

once. To my surprise, too, I discovered that the flame of the forest is a semi-deciduous tree. And lots of butterflies were swooping by, dropping in to flutter and flirt with the sparkles of fiery red flowers.

While I unearthed all this information, I also noticed that, sometimes, the intricate, lacy leaves seem to fold and never unfold. They droop dejectedly, before finally dropping off the branch.

Upon closer inspection, I

unexpectedly sighted sticks of dark green caterpillars hanging on for dear life to my precious branches, all the while chomping away soundlessly. Aghast, my first instinct was to yank the unwelcome intruders off their snug perch and destroy them. I'd sadly trim the side stalks and little leaflets, constantly trying to ferret out the nasty culprits. How dare they?

This vindictive two-way process had been going on for some time. Until I hit upon the conundrum one wet morning.

The garden is an evolving space, dependent on the gardener's mood and on weather patterns, as well as the movements of its inhabitants. Just because I own it and take care of it, does that mean it should grow as I expect?

If I appreciated the pretty yellow butterflies brightening up my mornings, should I not by the same token appreciate their offspring that would, at some point not far off, brighten up other gardens, too? As for trees, this is what happens to them wherever they take root, is it not?

As my garden grows, I'm aware that a big picture solution lies somewhere in this scenario. I haven't found it yet, nor have I decided what to do with the next batch of green thugs when I spot them.

While I ponder what to do, I shall continue to watch the luscious rain fall.

Delighting in dead ends, Jacqueline Pereira seeks unexpected encounters to counter the outmoded. Find her on Facebook at Jacqueline-Pereira-Writing-on.

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Park life

Here's a look at some of the green lungs that can be found in the Klang Valley.

Perdana Botanical Gardens

Situated close to the KL city centre, the Perdana Botanical Gardens provides city dwellers an opportunity to take a breather from the hustle and bustle of the city. A favourite weekend spot for families and individuals, it not only provides much-needed refuge of greenery to visitors, but also features many different species of flora and fauna, all tagged with information on its type and species. The garden, which has a good-sized lake as a centrepiece, also has a herbatarium, Orchid Garden, Hibiscus Garden and many others. The Perdana Botanical Gardens also has a library where visitors can look up information on the plants, insects and animals found there.

Forest Research Institute Malaysia (FRIM)

FRIM's main function may be to conduct research on forest and timber utilisation, but its main facility also serves as a favourite spot for nature lovers to enjoy some fresh air, have a picnic, outdoor recreation and other educational activities. Located about 16km from the city centre, the facility is one of the must-see attractions in Kuala Lumpur, especially for those who would like to know more about Malaysia's rainforest and its ecosystem. Spanning a 544ha area, FRIM boasts a wide variety of flora and fauna; many of these labelled or with information available at the facility's library. More info: frim.gov.my.

Kuala Lumpur City Centre Park

A favourite of tourists and locals alike, KLCC Park offers respite from a day of shopping at nearby Suria KLCC or from visiting the city. The 20.23ha park features ample greenery, playgrounds, a water fountain, a jogging track, benches, a wading pool and a lake, making it a welcome contrast from the concrete jungle surrounding the area.

Source: The Star/Metro