

THE GARDEN WHERE HAPPINESS LIVES

BY TATIANA ANDERSON. PHOTOS BY AUTHOR.

Growing outdoors

Gregory Gurvits and his wife Amprai both came to the US from overseas; each from a different country. Gregory, originally from Russia, made a career as a seaman in America, and met Amprai on his trip to Thailand—a beautiful “country of flowers”.

“Believe it or not, I never paid much attention to plants when I lived in Thailand! Only here, when our family bought the house in Florida eight years ago, is when I got so involved in gardening”, says Amprai. “We used to live in New Hampshire, but Gregory's father decided to move to Florida. I had no clue back then what Florida was about, and associated all the United States with snowy winters and cloudy skies. I accepted it as a part of my big move from the tropical surroundings of my home country. My father-in-law invited us to visit his new home in Florida, and once I saw it, I felt right at home here! I knew that I was not going back to New Hampshire. I told my husband that I was staying here, and to bring our stuff over, and so he did. Within a few months, we were moving in our new home in Ft Myers, Florida. At that time, the yard had only dried grass and jungle debris around it, so we took the machetes and started with cleaning that

mess. It took a little while, but here is what we have today!”

The Gurvits family is fairly large; they have three children: Anna, Avital, and Ezra, and three cats: Shlomi, Mokana, and Serena. Everyone is proud of their home and garden, and they are all happy here. When entering the old-style wooden gates adorned with blossoms of quiscalis and bougainvillea, it feels like entering into a fairy tale.

Feels like Thailand

Within the first glance of the garden, you will get the feeling that you are in Thailand. Those who have visited this fascinating country will definitely understand what this means. Plants are blooming, thriving, and all reaching up, towards the sun. Very soon you realize what makes this impression: every tree or shrub is trained to grow upright, allowing more light for the one next to it, creating more room for all other plants, which is so important for all advanced gardeners. The garden is planted, virtually, in levels; low growing plants fill the space in between the tall, upright “floral sculptures.” Where needed, a tree, or simply its heavy fruiting branch, is supported with a strong, angled wooden pole. This works much better than commonly used bamboo sticks or

bars hammered next to the trunk, which may damage the plant's root system. Also, understand that the tape used to tie the trees to these stakes will cut into their bark, which is not good for the

Growing outdoors:

You can either use your yard, or be used by your yard. If you are lucky enough to live in a warm climate, you had better take the most advantage of it as you possibly can by growing the most beautiful and life-sustaining presents that the nature has to offer. You will be given back so very much in return for your efforts.



plant. The property is only about one acre, but the garden consists of hundreds of species: many fruit trees, with several varieties of mango, mulberry, jackfruit, bananas, and a large selection of citrus as well as many others. The fruit always provide their every day rewarding deliciousness.

Another feature that makes the garden so “Thai-looking” is the abundance of potted plants, which are also all thriving and blooming. Believe it or not, in the hot Florida sun, it is not as easy to keep potted plants happy as one might think; too much heat sometimes be-

comes a problem for them. This is not a problem for Amprai though! She takes her daily journey around the garden, her watering can in hand! Not even a garden hose. She takes water conservation very seriously. She saves on city water, and does not mind the extra work. Three magic things help her with watering: filtered light provided by the canopy of the tall trees, a thick layer of “home-made mulch” (leaves and pine needles raked off the yard to add around the plants), and a watering well.

Here are few secrets of happiness in gardening.



Canopy

When the family first moved on the property, the yard looked like a native jungle, still full of invasive and noxious plants. Gregory and Amprai cleared the property, leaving only the tall trees: sabal palms, pine trees and a couple of oaks. Those trees provided a nice canopy for the future garden, serving two purposes: cold protection and sun protection.

During winter time, when night temperatures in their area (North Fort Myers) may drop down to the upper 20's°F during cold spells, the garden will stay warm. The tree canopies, like a natural roof, hold the underneath air that had been warmed up during the day from the

sun. "During the eight years we have lived here, we have never seen signs of ice in the bucket of water," says Amprai, "and you can see our ylang-ylang tree that blooms here year around. You know good and well that it would never tolerate freeze. Our jackfruits and mangoes are doing pretty good too, without protection".

Florida, the "Sunshine State", is so called for good reason; there are some 300 sunny days per year. This means, when it is hot— it is hot! Only a number of native plants can tolerate such an excessive amount of sunlight along with heavy rains. Sometimes, this combination is enough to kill certain exotic plants introduced here from the rainforest. However, the garden collection,

consisting of different species from all over the world, seems to be enjoying the natural environment. The light in the garden, though somewhat filtered, is still bright enough for flowering and fruiting. Palms and pines are the best solution for creating a natural “shade-house” and avoiding leaf burn. They do not take much space either, with trunks growing as high as forty feet and more. The filtered light has another advantage as well; it greatly reduces the amount of water required to keep the plants happy.

“Plant droppings”

A thick layer of natural mulch helps to keep the moisture in. The mulch consists of dry leaves, cut grass, pine needles, and small branches. These “plant droppings” eventually create the best organic compost as they break down. There are also a couple of compost piles in the corners of the garden, where all kinds of organic waste ends up: from

tree clippings to food leftovers. The piles look clean, not messy at all, and most importantly, they are environment friendly! Within a few months, the contents of the pile breaks down into nice black soil. Amprai then moves this super-fertilizer with a wheelbarrow, spreading it all around the plants, forming raised beds with excellent drainage. This process will also help the garden in becoming self-sufficient.

Waterwise gardening

The main source of water for the irrigation is a hand pumped water well that Gregory made himself. The water is pumped into the barrel from which Amprai draws out with her watering can. “This system can be installed pretty easily by the homeowner,” Gregory explains, “it is inexpensive, and very useful, especially in the areas with expensive city water or water conservation programs and limitations. This will





Hand pumped water well made by Gregory.
You can find more info about drive point well installation
here: <http://weather.nmsu.edu/hydrology/wellpoint.htm>

only work, of course, as long as underground water is accessible”.

It is hard to believe that just by means of a simple watering can, it is possible to water the whole garden. Amprai says, “It takes me about two hours to water everything. I do not know if it is too much to take care of the garden, but I feel content.” Anyone who has ever watered plants should know how it feels—relaxing and comforting. Getting stressed out? Go water the plants!

Enjoy

The list of happiness in gardening secrets would not be complete without this last, but certainly not least piece of advice: Enjoy your accomplishments!

For everyone who has ever used a shovel, it is no secret that gardening is not just a fun hobby, but good, hard work as well. Some gardeners become slaves to their garden, so much so, that they never have a chance to “stop and smell the roses”, but they really should. That is, after all, what garden is for—your enjoyment. The shade of the garden is inviting, the fine flower perfumes are intoxicating, and the view is enchanting. In Gurvits' garden, sitting benches are located everywhere! It is always the right time to sit down on a bench under a cozy gazebo, or in a swing between two shade trees. Better yet, why not lay down and stretch out on one of those oriental style decks with flowering vines above, and just meditate? Gregory has built quite a few of those around the garden, guided by Amprai-the-designer, of course. Some of these decks are made with a simple wooden fence section, which saves space as well. You can keep extra pots, tools, and other gardening items that you could not find room for in your slightly overwhelmed garage. Your pets will love those decks, too! You can bet that they are going to make a reservation for the ground floor.

Water adornment really should be a part of every garden. The sound of dripping water, be it from a little fountain or waterfall, sets your mind at ease, and takes all your worries away. Even the look of a simple water barrel with a lily in it can change the entire atmosphere dramatically. Amprai made those “water corners” everywhere she could find a spot, considering that they do not need much room at all. She would never miss the opportunity to fill up any spare bucket, and within no time, some water



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lily would be living there. Most of her water gardens do not have any pumps or filters; the water plants growing in them take care of all the organics in the water and keep it clean. Goldfishes— large, bright red and also happy (no way to be otherwise for a goldfish) never get fed with any special kind of food. They get all they need from the environment— bugs, mosquitoes, and algae. There are gazillions of them in the ponds!

Now the Garden is complete, consistent and content!

Let them grow!

The future plan for Gregory and Amprai is to make the yard into a small botanical garden. They already started labeling every species with special long-life aluminum tags. This way, their plant collection can all be identified. Gregory's next step is to build a conservatory for the most cold sensitive species. He found a perfect spot behind the house,

protected from cold winds. This will be one of our next stories!

The Gurvits' garden is real inspiration for every gardener, both amateur or expert grower. What really amazes, is how there are so many trees planted so closely to one another, and yet, they all look so great and happy; blooming and fruiting profusely. “We have not seen any insects or problems whatsoever.” Amprai says. She also claims to never spray any insecticides. The watering amount is just minimum— after all, how much water can you obviously deliver with a watering can to hundreds of mature trees if you have three kids and a house to take care of? No fertilizer is applied either, except the natural organics from the compost piles and leaf/needle mulch. Only the original soil is used



Tatiana started learning about plants when she was six years old from her father, Vsevolod Bondarev, a Russian scientist. She graduated from Moscow State University with a master's degree in Earth Science. Tatiana lives in South Florida and together, with her husband Michael, grows a botanical garden. Plants and photography are her passion and profession.





for planting the trees, and believe it, Florida soil is not the most fertile! In fact, it is pretty much so all sand. Before they started the garden, however, it was already a jungle there, which provided an initial thin layer of organic soil. So, what is the secret of this happiness?

“I talk to every plant when I water it.”, says the lady of the house.

Is that it? It is probably also important what exactly it is that she tells them! Any special sacred spell?

“All people are so different, we all come from different backgrounds, cultures and religions, but in fact, we are all the same before God, and He is— This!”— she showed around with her hands.

“What are you going to do when all these trees grow too big?”, we asked her. All she said was, “Let them grow!”●

TAMBALACOQUE, THE DODO TREE

BY MARINA RYBKA, PHOTOS BY AUTHOR

Tambalacoque (*Sideroxylon grandiflorum*), also called the dodo tree, is a long-lived tree belonging to the Sapotaceae family. Mamey sapote and canistel fruit trees belong to this family as well. The tree is indigenous to Mauritius—a small island off the southeast coast of Africa. Tambalacoque's seed resembles that of a peach; both have a hard layer, which directly sur-

rounds the seed. This tree is highly valued for its hard wood. In fact, its scientific name is derived from the Greek words *sideros*, meaning iron, and *xylon*, meaning wood. A closely related species is chittamwood or gum bumelia (*S. lanuginosa*), which is widespread in the US.

Until recently, it was thought that this species was dying out. There were supposedly only thirteen specimens left, all estimated to be about 300 years old. Though they were all still successfully fruiting, no young trees or seedlings were being discovered. It was hypothesized that the dodo bird, which became extinct in the 17th century, ate tambalacoque fruit, and only by passing through the digestive tract of the dodo could the seeds



Image by Eugene Sofiyanchuk

Exotic Kaleidoscope