



GreenFriends North America NEWSLETTER

SECOND QUARTER 2024
APRIL – JUNE



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Arun Narayan Toke spent five days camping, hiking and rafting for over 60 miles in the Owyhee River Canyon wilderness in Oregon. He also volunteers at a youth farm and commutes to work on a bicycle. In his photographic essay, he illustrates that Nature is our home which needs to be both protected and respected.

GreenFriends
strives to
communicate the
importance of
treating Nature with
respect and
gratitude.

We invite each of you Green Friends to share your ideas and experiences with your own gardening efforts as well as experiences with animals.

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AMMA'S 2024 VISHU MESSAGE



VISHU IS A FESTIVAL THAT MARKS THE BEGINNING OF THE NEW HARVEST YEAR IN KERALA, INDIA.

It celebrates the timeless belief that 'wealth shared with others will grow and multiply in abundance.' Amma's Vishu message carried prayers for joy, beauty and prosperity to all of humankind and nature.

“On this auspicious day, may we dedicate ourselves to displaying compassion towards all living beings and restoring the Earth's beauty adorned with lush plants and trees,” said Amma. “May the grace of the Divine bless us with the wisdom to discern rightly and to exert the right effort towards this.”

Amma began Vishuthaineetham (where 'thai' means 'seedling' or 'sapling' in Malayalam) in 2015 with the aim of reviving and deepening respect and love for Mother Nature. In addition to Vishu Taineetham, the

tradition of receiving money from family elders, youth receive the gift of a sapling for Vishu to promote tree planting and ecological restoration for future generations.



“In Sanatana Dharma, we can see that all the festivals signify the connection between these three aspects—humankind, Mother Nature, and the Divine. If we can take all these three in a unified way, then peace and happiness will prevail everywhere,” said Amma. “First, we should create awareness of the Atman, the True Self. Then we will be able to understand the qualities of nature, and this will eventually lead us to be thankful to the Creator.”

Amma shared how in Sanatana Dharma, the Creator and creation are not two, but one. There is nothing other than God—not only that there is only one God, but that everything is God. Amma also said that in creation, humankind cannot exist without nature. Yet, if humankind ceases to exist, nature will thrive.

“Only after the last tree is cut down, only after the last river is poisoned, and only after the last fish is caught—only then will we realise that we cannot eat money,” said Amma, sharing a well-known prophecy by the Cree First Nations in Canada.

Amma continued to explain that there are three kinds of people: prakriti, vikriti and samskriti. Prakriti people take only their share but do not concern themselves with the needs of others. People of vikriti nature not only eat their own share, but they also snatch as much as they can from others.

Sanskriti people are those who take as little as possible and then share as much as they can. Since Mother Nature is demonstrating the quality of sanskriti, we should also elevate ourselves to that state.

“As an example, if you own land, you could make a 6’x6’ or a 3’x3’ pit, to serve as a rainwater harvesting point. You could raise fish there, as well, or could take baths in the pure waters without adding chlorine,” said Amma, about a practical level of action.

“You could also grow organic vegetables around these ponds to provide food for family and friends. We have begun to do waste management everywhere, but we can raise the bar so that nothing goes to waste.”



Swamini Ambikamrita Prana gifts saplings to a young devotee at the MA Center Chicago Vishu celebration.



Youth receiving flower seedlings from Dr M.N. Namboodiri, a longtime devotee, at the MA Center San Ramon Vishu celebration.

In addition to tree planting, Amma also spoke about the Global Seedball Campaign, initiated by Amma, Chair of C20 2023. Seedballs are an ancient technique for reforestation and soil restoration. A seedball is made up of soil and seeds, often mixed with clay and other organic materials to hold the ball together. They are then scattered in local ecosystems as a low-cost restoration solution, since they only need natural rainfall to germinate and grow into mature plants. “With the help of various Navy and Central Reserve Police Force (CRPF) units, along with our volunteers, millions of trees and plants have been sown around the world,” said Amma.

“Even if we have medicine for diabetes, if we don’t follow the diet and prescription, it will worsen the situation. In a similar way, awareness regarding how we must now support Mother Nature is crucial. Only then will humankind wake up and we will uplift ourselves.

“Amma is happy to see people becoming more aware about nature. If everyone develops such an attitude, we can make this world a beautiful garden. Amma prays to the Paramatman for everyone to receive the Grace to come forward and undertake such actions. Amma bows down again in gratitude for these efforts.”

JOHNNY APPLESEED – AN AWESOME TREE-PLANTER



JOHNNY APPLESEED.



JOHNNY APPLESEED WAS NOT JUST A MYTHIC FIGURE, HE WAS A REAL PERSON WHO PLANTED APPLE TREES THROUGHOUT HIS ENTIRE ADULT LIFE.

It's estimated he raised about 300,000 apple seedlings in his nurseries in Pennsylvania, Ohio, West Virginia, Indiana and Illinois, and as far north as Ontario, Canada.

His real name was John Chapman. He was born on September 26th, 1774, in Leominster, Massachusetts. In his 20s, Johnny was deeply affected by the writing of a Swedish mystic named Emanuel Swedenborg. Swedenborg taught that humans are spirits in material bodies, and that one should do good, and spread the word of God's goodness and bounty.

Swedenborg argued against the prevailing thought at the time, that faith alone could bring salvation. He said faith must be acted upon by doing acts of charity, to earn God's favor. He said "the purpose of faith is to lead a person to live according to the truths of faith, which is charity."

As well as Johnny Appleseed, Swedenborg's writings influenced many well-known writers and thinkers, including Carl Jung, William Blake, Ralph Waldo Emerson, Helen Keller, D.T. Suzuki, W.B. Yeats and Honore de Balzac. Johnny reportedly carried Swedenborg's books and a Bible with him all his days, lived a very simple, frugal life even when he could afford luxury, and was known for his acts of kindness and generosity.

At 21, Johnny went westward, first to New York and Pennsylvania, and then on to Ohio. He was described as 5 feet, 7 inches tall, with large bones, strong and muscular from working, but thin from all his walking.

Johnny didn't sprinkle apple seeds randomly. He planted apple nurseries, fenced them to protect them from animals, left them in the care of a neighbor, and returned every couple of years to check on them.

He sold young trees for about six and a half cents to settlers moving west. Many land-grant companies required settlers to plant 50 apple trees on their new land within one year. When some didn't have the cash, he would also accept used clothing, a meal, a place to sleep, food for his travels, or a promise to pay in the future.

In the fall, he would walk east to the cider mills to stock up on apple seeds and then carry them back west in burlap sacks by horse, raft, and canoe. He often slept outdoors and loved the wilderness. By 1815, he owned 640 acres of land, and had sold thousands of trees to settlers who were migrating west.

Although he was not a poor man, Johnny wore castoff clothes and a shirt made of a coffee sack. He was said to wear a tin mush pot for a hat, and to go shoeless even in snowstorms. He preached about Swedenborg's Church of the New Jerusalem.

"His was a strange eloquence at times, and he was undoubtedly a man of genius," said a lady who knew him in his later years.



Johnny Appleseed's Birthplace, Leominster, Massachusetts.

He became a vegetarian, was kind to animals, and it was said he would put out his campfire rather than let mosquitoes be harmed by flying into it. He was friendly with both settlers and Native Americans, had learned enough of some Native American languages to be able to communicate, and sometimes was able to help settle differences between the two groups. Native Americans said he had been touched by the Great Spirit.

It was said he helped to heal a wolf's injured leg, and from then on, the wolf followed him and protected him. When he saw a sick horse that was going to be put down, he bought the horse as well as some nearby grassy land, where it was able to recover. When it was better, he gave the horse to someone needy, asking that they treat it well.

Johnny was knowledgeable about medicinal uses of herbs, and also planted herb seeds wherever he went. He didn't believe in grafting apples, so all the apple trees he planted were grown from seed. Apple seeds are heterozygous, so they don't necessarily grow 'true to type' – each seed can grow into a tree with fruit very different from the parent tree.



In his book, *The Botany of Desire*, Michael Pollan said the apples Johnny Appleseed planted were likely small and bitter, and were most likely used to make hard cider. "In rural areas, cider took the place of not only wine and beer but of coffee and tea, juice, and even water," Pollan wrote. They may also have been used in jams, jellies or baking, and to feed livestock.

Pollan also credits Johnny's widespread planting of apple trees grown from seed with the development of new varieties such as Delicious and Golden Delicious apple trees. Grafting ensures that the apples will be the same variety as the grafted variety, whereas, when trees are instead grown from seed, each seed could grow into a tree with apples that taste different than those on the original tree. Many of the trees may bear fruit that is bitter. But by planting many seeds, conditions were created for new varieties, some of which were very tasty.

Johnny planted and cared for his apple trees until the end of his life. He died at about age 70 in Fort Wayne, Indiana, possibly of pneumonia, when he became ill after walking through a snowstorm. At that time he owned more than 1,200 acres of orchards, with 15,000 apple trees and 2,000 seedlings. Everything he owned was left to his sister. It was said he died peacefully.

For more information, see:

- https://web.archive.org/web/20060905033519/http://www.in.gov/ism/Education/Johnny_Apple_seed.pdf
- https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Emanuel_Swedenborg

~ TIRTHA G., VANCOUVER ISLAND, B.C.

NATURE AND AMMA



SATSANG BY MR. SHIVARAMAKRISHNA, A SENIOR RESIDENT OF AMRITAPURI ASHRAM.

A few months ago Amma asked little Niranjan to pet Shyamakutti, one of the calves in Amritapuri and give satsang to her. Several devotees enjoyed watching the video of Niranjan's sessions with Shyama. I became curious and immediately searched and found a research paper by the University of Veterinary Medicine, Vienna, Austria "Frontiers of Psychology." The article revealed that cows become happy when they hear human voices in person. This is because cows like to be spoken to and petted; interestingly, they don't respond to an artificial or a recorded voice. The parameters checked to confirm the cow's state of mind and its mood were its heart rate, body language, and the position of its ears. The research also showed that cows yield more milk when they hear music because it activates the production of oxytocin - a hormone triggering milk production.

Dr. Adrian North and Dr. Liam Mechenzie say that when cows hear the music of Beethoven, they yield more milk, but when they hear Rock & Roll songs they do not yield more.

This is why I believe Amma may have asked Niranjan, "Today what did you teach the calf Shyamakutti?"

Further research shows that cows love flute music. Maybe that is the reason why Lord Krishna played his flute as a cowherd boy. One of the latest trends in the USA is charging \$50 to \$200 per hour to hug a cow in order to improve the emotional well-being of anyone who is depressed.



Plants are also positively affected by kindness and beautiful sounds. We have heard on more than one occasion Amma saying that even while plucking leaves from plants, we should take only the minimum required (example of jackfruit leaves for making spoons to eat kanji rice porridge).

We can say that the human and animal kingdom have somewhat more developed minds than plants. But, even plants pick up the intention of humans when the axeman comes with the intention to cut them (experiment by Prof. Backster).

When a polygraph (an instrument similar to a lie detector) was connected to an oak tree, it reacted violently when it sensed someone's intention to cut it down but had no reaction when there was no such intention. Interestingly, science has proven that plants warn other plants of impending danger of attack by pests up to a certain distance by sending messages through [vibrations](#).

In 1968, the *International Journal of Parapsychology* published a paper, "Perception in Plant Life", which contains numerous examples of the ways plant life react to stimuli, both positive and negative, proving how sensitive plants are to surroundings. The research showed that carrot plants shiver out of fear when they sense that a hungry rabbit is approaching.

Another study told of a scientist who was eating yogurt (for enriching probiotics as it has millions of lactobacillus), and when he mixed in some sweet jam, suddenly he noticed a violent change in the polygraph (an instrument connected to the yogurt). He concluded that the fluctuation was caused by some of the chemical preservatives in the jam he mixed into the yogurt, which had terminated (or killed) thousands of live bacilli present in yogurt. We can imagine how chemicals added as preservatives and pesticides used in the food industry, especially in processed food, kill millions of useful bacteria in our guts, proving that preservatives are harmful and we should be careful when choosing to use preserved foods.



At least from the above experiments we know why Amma asserted decades ago, and repeats even now, that we should seek permission from plants before plucking leaves or flowers and only pluck the bare minimum quantity required as even plants have lives. And it is important to note that plants support human and animal life by producing oxygen. Research indicates that a tree, on average, gives oxygen worth Rs.20 lakhs (~ \$24,000) during its lifetime. So we would do well to worship God in every aspect of Creation in the same way Amma does. Amma worships all objects she handles, and she even shows reverence to the wooden steps while she is climbing to the stage. Amma reflects the ways of our ancestors who introduced a Subhashitham (Sanskrit maxim) eulogizing the plant kingdom - to quote "chayam.....sat purushah eva,"

which means "the trees give shade to others while bearing the heat of scorching sun, its fruits are enjoyed by others not by them, and trees are like Mahatmas (like Amma) who live for the sake of others".

Research has proven that if we inflict pain on plants by cutting them or even make them hungry by not watering the plant, causing them to suffer, the plants cry in despair. Frantisek Baluska of University of Bonn, Germany informed Joanna Klein of the New York Times that plant sensitivity can be detected through use of ultrasound. Besides, Plant Scientist, Prof. Itzhak Khait from Tel Aviv, Israel, used ultrasound technique and found that tomato and tobacco plants, when their stems were cut or were starved (when not watered), sent a vibration of pain and distress up to a certain distance from the plant.

Research contains many such examples. We can see how mantra vibrations change the texture of water, a practice which Amma uses while doing Bhava Darshan Pooja to transmit her spiritual energy into the water molecules. Our ancient vedic wisdom has affirmed this practice in *Thaithriya Samhita* (an ancient Vedic scripture) written in 600 B C, when the rishis (ancient sages) worshiped nature, including plants, as part of God. To quote *Sri Rudram*, a sacred hymn dedicated to Lord Shiva:

vrukshanam pathaye namo
vrukshebhyo harikesebhya pasoonampathaye namo
Vanaanaam patheynamo
namo vanyayacha kashyayacha
nama parnyaayacha Parna sadyayacha
oushadeenam pathaye namo

Meaning:

I salute the Lord of all trees
salutations to all trees tufted with green leaves
I salute the lord of forest
salute lord in the form of trees in the forest and creepers in the shaded areas
salute who is in green leaves and dried ones
I salute you who is in the form of medicinal plants

In *Chamakam*, many plants which yield grains, paddy, barley, blackgram, green gram, wheat, Bengal gram, millet, etc., are reverently mentioned as desirable crops. There are hundreds of mantras for worshiping trees – for example, the Peepal tree mantra:

Moolatho brahma roopaya,
madhyatho visnu roopine,
Agratha Shiva roopaya,
vruksha rajaya the nama.

Meaning:

Salutations to the king of trees,
Whose roots are Lord Brahma,
Whose stem is Lord Vishnu,
And whose crown is Lord Shiva.

That is probably why Amma started *thaineetam*, a new tradition where youth receive the gift of a sapling for Vishu (in lieu of or in addition to the more traditional gift of money), to promote tree planting and ecological restoration for future generations. By planting trees, we ensure that human beings can get enough oxygen, which is produced by the plant kingdom. Plants breathe in carbon dioxide that we exhale, they breathe out oxygen that we inhale.

Amma says the core teaching of Sanatana dharma is to see divinity in everything and to worship all beings, sentient and insentient. May we each strive to achieve this.

~ SRI SIVARAMAKRISHNAN, AMRITAPURI



LIVING OFF THE GRID



Earthship outside of Taos, New Mexico



IN TAOS, NEW MEXICO, ON A SAGE MESA, THE DIRECTIONS TO MY HOME WERE: GO OVER THE GORGE BRIDGE, AFTER TWO MILES TURN RIGHT AT THE TREE.

It was the only tree, and we named our street, “Lone Tree Lane.” I lived in an Earthship, an off-grid home invented by Taos Architect Michael Reynolds. My home was in an Earthship community on about 400 acres. In 1994 or so, only a few of the homes in this newest of Michael Reynolds’ three Earthship communities were ready for occupancy, and mine was one of them. When friends visited for the first time, they were often visibly moved, sometimes catching their breath in awe. Many found it like coming upon an oasis when they would enter the large spacious living room with its huge planters—a lemon tree, hibiscus, jasmine, rosemary, banana and such—that lined the floor to ceiling south-facing windows. The roundness of the inside and the warmth of the adobe made it feel like you were in the arms of Mother Earth. And the silence was palpable.

Everything about Earthships, just about, is Earth-friendly. They are built partially down into the ground with sides of the dugout becoming part of the walls and then with used tires filled with dirt and laid down like bricks the rest of the way up. Each tire weighs about 300 pounds. The labor is intensive. (I’d choose strawbale and all the

same off-grid methods and adobe plastering, if I were to build again). Then the inside is plastered with adobe mud. The outside from the north looks like a little hill, with dirt and grass growing on the berms. This page on the Earthship website shows photos that most closely resemble my Earthship home: <https://earthshipstore.com/collections/construction-drawings-offgrid>. As you'll note on the main website, some of the buildings have become quite fancy in design compared to the more basic floor plan.

The roof is made of a special non-toxic material and is designed to catch water which pours into a 3,000-gallon cistern inside the house, in a space between the bedroom and living area. Mine had a little waterfall that turned on when the sun rose, operated by a solar panel—this kept the water fresh. Water was pumped into the kitchen and shower faucets. Drinking and cooking water was filtered. Gray water was piped into the planters. I had someone build a small pond outside in front where the water overflow from summer monsoons kept it full. Goldfish grew large and lily pads offered shade and shelter. A black snake found the Goldfish tasty and that was the end of that.

For electricity, there were solar panels across the front, just above the ceiling to floor windows. These powered DC for light and refrigerator. I loved the gentle feeling of DC lights and the silence of the refrigerator. As I mentioned, there is a downside to being off the grid, most particularly the use of solar panels—batteries are essential, high maintenance, and the upside is that they are recyclable, if you can find where: [Recycling and Reusing Solar Panels and Batteries](#).

I rarely had to use the fireplace in winter, even at below freezing outdoors temperatures, as the adobe walls gathered heat during the day. The south-facing windows were critical for light and for heat and for plants.

My composting toilet made great fertilizer. A friend dug holes and I'd empty the contents along with food scraps, into the holes and then when full, covered them with dirt. After a few months, it was the most amazing compost I've ever used. But, yes, there was a huge "but" in my planting dreams. The mesa was windy and the dugout



Rocky Mountain Bee Plant

area in the front would flood during monsoons. I tried everything to get grass growing on the berms or whatever native plants might enjoy this setting. I did manage a small patch of bright green grass on the berm in front of the windows and discovered to my delight just how amazing my compost was. Then I planted something called the Rocky Mountain Bee plant on that front berm—gorgeous lavender flowers and long legume-like seed pods. It has medicinal qualities including use for stomach aches and sore eyes. The birds that were tall enough to reach the edible pods, loved them. It was fun to watch the birds point their beaks upwards and then jump to grab a pod. Later, along my walks, I found these flowers growing elsewhere on the mesa—the birds had planted seeds in their poop. I found this to be a great testament to our beloved Amma's seed ball project, as such plantings will spread far and wide, by wind and birds.

Naturally, I needed ways to store my food. I tried my best to buy only items in glass jars or bottles, and I used only glass jars for storage. I was inspired to stay aware of the horrors of plastic waste when I read about the Great Pacific Garbage Patch, one of a few soupy parts of the ocean made up of discarded plastics—from large items to micro. Apparently the GPGP has about “79,000 tons of ocean plastic floating inside an area of 1.6 million sq km (618,000 sq miles)... This is twice the size of Texas, or three times the size of France.” Recycling and reducing plastic production will be key in limiting garbage patches. There is an international plastics treaty which will be negotiated in 2024: <https://www.unep.org/news-and-stories/press-release/historic-day-campaign-beat-plastic-pollution-nations-commit-develop> To this day, I use mostly glass jars and bottles, and always recycle my plastics and urge others to do the same.



Inside an Earthship

Of course, another advantage to my Earthship was the small community. Right across Lone Tree Lane from me, a young woman was building her own Earthship, mostly by herself. We helped each other in various ways—including sharing food items—and we had nice chats. Down the lane a couple was also still in the building process. They enjoyed that I had one of the first cell phones, a huge and heavy thing that only worked if it was near the window. I used it rarely. This couple had kids and were comforted knowing they could use my phone in an emergency. And Michael Reynold’s “office” was in an Earthship just down the road—I was friendly with him and his staff.

Swamiji Dayamritananda Puri visited one time to give a retreat in my Earthship living room. Swamiji at the time served as head of Santa Fe ashram in New Mexico, and now he lives in San Ramon ashram and is the director of M.A. Centers in North America. His retreat got a huge front page publicity write-up in The Taos News. About 30 people showed up. Great success. Not long after, my dog Delilah, a sweet Old English Sheep dog mix, died at age 13. Under a full moon, my neighbor and I buried her out back, piling large rocks on the grave to protect it from coyotes. Soon, Swamiji contacted me and said that now that my dog was gone, I could move into the Santa Fe ashram. With Amma’s Grace, and a bit of amazing Cosmic Wonder, our beloved Amma found me a buyer right away. And so it was that my Earthship days were over.

~ SAVITRI, OLYMPIC PENINSULA, WA

BEAUTY IN A BACKYARD COMPOST



A FEW YEARS AGO, WE WERE BLESSED WITH THE OPPORTUNITY TO MOVE OUT OF OUR 16TH FLOOR APARTMENT, INTO A HOUSE. ALMOST RIGHT AWAY, MY HUSBAND STARTED TALKING ABOUT BUILDING A BACKYARD COMPOST.

“Is that really necessary?” I asked. “We have city compost.”

We live in Toronto where the city has us sort our garbage into recyclables, compost, and trash. Because they use large-scale anaerobic digestion technology, the city can compost things we can't, like soiled pizza boxes, paper muffin wrappers, or corn cobs – for non-vegetarians, even meat scraps, eggs, or dairy products can go in the city compost!



Garbage bin and green waste bin at the curb for pickup.

Once a week, food waste gets picked up from every house in the city, and processed into a nutrient-rich compost, which is then freely distributed to residents to use in their gardens. Food waste is also used by the city to generate renewable natural gas that gets used to power city vehicles and heat buildings.

I reasoned that since we benefit from the city program by picking up bags of compost every year, and it's so convenient, couldn't we just participate by leaving our food waste at the curb? Besides, we definitely didn't want to attract mice or rats into the yard to feast on our food scraps.

In previous years, [we used a homemade compost system on our balcony](#), where there was no possibility of attracting vermin. It was an excellent solution to our building's choice not to participate in the city compost program. But this system would no longer work in the house, if we wanted to avoid bringing in rodents. To continue composting our food scraps, we would need a large/solid backyard compost bin, and that was more plastic than either of us wanted to use.

We don't produce a lot of food waste in our household, and there would still be a few items that a backyard compost couldn't handle, meaning we would need to rely on the city's pickup system anyway. After much thought, we both conceded that using the city's compost program was likely the most environmentally sound decision for dealing with our food waste.

I was inwardly glad we didn't have to dedicate any yard space to creating a compost system. My husband, though, didn't give up on the idea of having our own compost. What about composting our yard waste, he asked.



Somewhat dismayed, I responded that the city conveniently picks that up for us too. We just have to package it and leave it at the curb; it's easy and free.

He responded that although a good system, it still generates waste, because the yard waste (sticks, leaves, weeds, plant material, etc.) goes in bags. "But they're paper," I said, ever conscious of our plastic footprint.

"Paper still comes from trees," my husband stated softly.

I was convinced. Reluctantly so. I wasn't keen on using yard space for what I envisioned would be a huge eye sore. Nonetheless, I was on board with setting up a homemade yard waste composter.

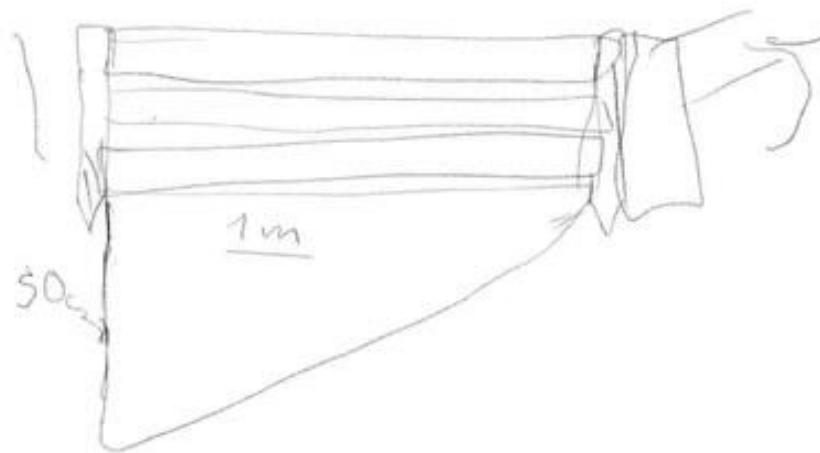
Amma teaches us to reduce waste and minimize our impact on nature. I want to follow Amma's words to the best of my ability. I certainly couldn't let something as trivial as aesthetics stand in the way of reducing our paper bag consumption and doing our part for Mother

Nature.



Bin for collecting food scraps in the kitchen

I was skeptical at every stage of the project, but with humility and gratitude, I am now happy to say: I was wrong.



Original sketch plans.

It started by digging a large pit in the ground, about 20" x 40" and 1.5 feet deep at the front (the dirt floor of the pit is on a slant for ease of use). We reinforced the sides of the pit with recycled wood beams. The stakes used in the four corners, which hold the structure in place, are protected with asphalt glue so that they won't decompose in the ground.

We found a wooden pallet that had been damaged and was put out with the trash on garbage day. We carried it home and modified it into a lid for the compost pit. A neighbor had torn down an old fence, and offered the wood pieces. The pallet and the fence became the walls and lid of the compost, which now stands about a foot above the ground. The front is open so yard waste can be easily tossed in, or the pit can be easily accessed.

The whole system blends into the background so it's barely even noticeable. In fact, when you notice it, it even looks nice.

We feed it with yard waste: grass clippings when we mow the lawn, leaves that fall from the trees, plant clippings. Anything that looks too big, we snip into smaller pieces before tossing it in. (Some things we still leave to the city, which can handle larger items like sticks or complicated items like dandelions and other weeds.)



Digging the pit.

Our compost system requires maintenance. When outdoor temperatures are above 50°F (10°C), we rotate it with a pitchfork to bring oxygen inside. This is done just once a week. Any unpleasant smell is a sign it's not being rotated often enough. But that's all it needs, and Mother Nature takes care of the rest. With time (about a year), the pile of yard waste decomposes into useable soil, which we can filter out by shoveling it into a container covered with a homemade chicken wire sieve.

There's nothing in there that attracts rodents or other animals. It doesn't smell. It doesn't even look offensive.



Filling the pit.



Screening the compost.

Three years in, the yard waste compost is still a success. It is producing rich soil from decomposed plant matter that is immediately recycled into our backyard ecosystem. It feeds our vegetable garden and flowerpots. It connects us more deeply to the nature in our small outdoor space.

What we give to nature pales in comparison to what she gives back. Our backyard compost is just one example of this.

“It is high time to give serious thought to protecting nature. The destruction of nature is synonymous to the destruction of humanity. Trees, animals, birds, plants, forests, mountains, lakes and rivers - everything that exists in nature - is in desperate need of our kindness, compassionate care and protection. If we protect them, they will in turn protect us.” -Amma

Composting is an excellent way to support nature. When we put food waste into garbage and landfill, it creates harmful greenhouse gases, but when we manage food waste effectively, it can be turned into renewable energy and nourishing soil for plants.



Compost bin blends into the yard in summer.

There are lots of options for composting – from worms, to industrial/city solutions, to balcony or backyard options. The possibilities are there for all of us to contribute to a better world through waste management.

“Every small effort we make towards environmental conservation is precious because it helps sustain life. This is actually more precious than any kind of material wealth.” -Amma



The backyard garden that accepts our compost.

~ NATASHA, TORONTO, ON

NATURE OFFERS US THE MOST PRECIOUS GIFT OF LIFE!



Camping in the Owyhee River Canyon, Oregon.

All photographs (except Arun hugging the Ponderosa Pine) by Arun Narayan Toké, Eugene, Oregon.



HOW OFTEN DO WE CONNECT WITH NATURE IN OUR BUSY LIFE?

We get caught in a rut in our daily life; we spend most of our time in built environments—homes, office buildings, schools, shopping malls, cars and factories. No wonder we often do not live in harmony with nature.

Let's learn to spend quality time in nature; immerse ourselves in the outdoors as often as our life permits. We certainly can, especially in warmer weather! For example, I volunteer at a youth farm on a weekly basis during the growing season. And, I commute to work on a bicycle, reducing my carbon footprint. I may have bicycled 50,000 miles in the last 50 years.

We can seek opportunities like gardening, camping and hiking, or simply walking in nearby nature areas—rivers and lakes, coast, etc. Last month, I spent five days camping, hiking and rafting for over 60 miles in the Owyhee River Canyon wilderness. I did not look forward to returning to the city life after that immersion.



Hiking the McArthur Ridge Trail,
Oregon Cascades



Arun hugging a Ponderosa Pine.
Photo by Mel Bankoff.

Amma says, "Nature is God in another form."

Let us protect and respect the natural world.



Snow-fed mountain streams bring us water year-round.

My 88-year-old friend, Paul composts all his yard waste in a big home-made compost pile and grows organic veggies. Govind, a local Amma devotee has severe back pain and he gardens employing scores of potted plants. We all find living closer to nature allows us to live fully.



My friend Paul has “walking onions” in his garden



Paul composts all his yard waste in his garden



Paul composts all his yard waste in his garden

PHOTOGRAPHIC ESSAY ~ ARUN NARAYAN TOKÉ, EUGENE, OREGON



When we
human beings
fall in *Love*
with *nature*,
she will
fall in love
with *us*.
~ *Amma*

 /MataAmritanandamayi



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