

On *Amherstia nobilis*

Introduction: In the August 2002 issue of *Resonance* we had featured the tree *Amherstia nobilis* in the inside back cover. The photograph was taken from the gardens of the Indian Institute of Astrophysics, Bangalore, founded by Vainu Bappu. On seeing this photograph and reading the articles on Vainu Bappu, S Krishnan wrote to us on the origin of this tree which Bappu so lovingly nurtured as he did many of the institutions he founded. A colour picture of the flower sent by S Krishnan is reproduced in the table of contents page of this issue.

Editor

*I met Dr Bappu for the first time in the early days of the Kavalur telescope in the company of Dr Radhakrishnan. When Radhakrishnan introduced me to Bappu as a person with some interest in trees, Bappu showed me a large plant in his garden sporting scarlet flowers. He said he did not know the name of the plant and asked me if I knew. I did not, but told him I would find out and let him know. I did write to him soon after I returned to Bangalore that it was a *Jatropha pandurifolia*.*

*Almost every time we met after that, we used to talk about trees, and in particular about the trees he wanted to plant in the new campus of IIA (Indian Institute of Astrophysics, Bangalore) in Bangalore I suggested that he should grow an *Amherstia nobilis* in IIA and that would be unique. Bappu was instantly interested.*

Amherstia is so rare that only two of these trees have ever been found in the wild. A native of Burma (now Myanmar), it is universally considered to be the most beautiful flowering tree in the world. Nathaniel Wallich (Director of East India Company's Botanical Garden in Calcutta in the 1830's) described it as a superlative wonder of the flowering tree world. The breathtaking beauty of its hanging racemes of blood-red flowers defies description. In 1835, soon after this great tree was 'discovered' by the British East India Company, the sixth Duke of Devonshire spent a large fortune to locate and bring a plant to his hot-house in England. He sent his gardener extra-ordinary, John Gibson, to India. The adventure, spanning well over a year, ended with Gibson carrying a plant for his master in a ship which took five months to reach the shores of England. The East India Company in India had helped Gibson in his travels in India, and they added a second plant for the Court of the Company in England. The plants no doubt received the greatest care in transit. Gibson carried the plants in his own cabin and gave them his continuous care and attention. They lived almost till they reached the shores of England, but then one of them, the one meant for the Duke, died! However, with some prompting from the Duke and a friendly warning that the plant was almost sure to die without the care of Gibson and Paxton, the Duke's own gardeners, the Directors of East India Company gifted their plant to the Duke. This plant grew into a beautiful tree and delighted the duke with its glorious flowers.

As a grown tree, the Amherstia is not too delicate to care for. Nor is the plant difficult to grow from seed. But the young plants are extremely delicate and very difficult to grow into a tree. They tend to die for no reason at all after appearing to be perfectly healthy for a period of time. Growing the plant into a tree is a true 'intensive care' job with no guarantee of success.

Bappu got very interested and the next exercise was to get the know-how on nursing the young Amherstia in the early years. We decided to consult a very senior and respected horticulturist in Bangalore. It was difficult to get an appointment to meet him, but we managed. On being asked how to grow the Amherstia in Bangalore, this worthy gentleman replied "You cannot grow the Amherstia in Bangalore" When we pointed out to him that there were two beautiful trees in Lalbagh Botanical Garden, Bangalore, the gentleman replied "They were planted by the British. You can't grow that tree in Bangalore!" At that he signified that the interview was closed and he rose. Perhaps realizing that he had been a little too curt, he turned towards us once more and said "If you want any further help in these matters, send your gardener to me"

Some independent studies showed that there was some chance of success if the young plant was nursed in shade most of the time with plenty of water (but no water-logging) and given a little sunshine everyday in the early hours of the day. We obtained two potted plants from the Brindavan Nursery, which was owned by a great plant enthusiast, Mr Veerappa. He had grown them from seeds picked up from Lalbagh. He also told us what we already knew, that it would be very difficult to grow them. I took one plant to grow and Bappu took the other one. He nursed it like nursing a delicate child. He made a separate wooden enclosure for the plant with adjustable shutters. His gardeners had clear instructions to let in a little sunlight every morning and then cover the plant to provide shade for the rest of the day. Moisture was assured and so was good drainage to keep the area from flooding and water-logging. I tried to do the same things but after living for a full three months in a healthy condition, my plant died without giving even a short notice. Bappu managed to grow the plant into a small tree, but unfortunately, he did not live to see the tree flower. For several years now, the Amherstia in IIA has been flowering profusely and is a thing of beauty in Bappu's beautiful garden. This is the only Amherstia in the whole of Bangalore outside Lalbagh. It must be one of the very few Amherstia's in the whole world outside of Botanical gardens. It stands testimony not only to Bappu's love for plants, but also to his meticulous care and concern for every detail in whatever he did. He did not simply seek excellence; he sought perfection and he reached it with the Amherstia.

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