

NON-GARDENING IN A RAINFOREST

By Stephen Wright



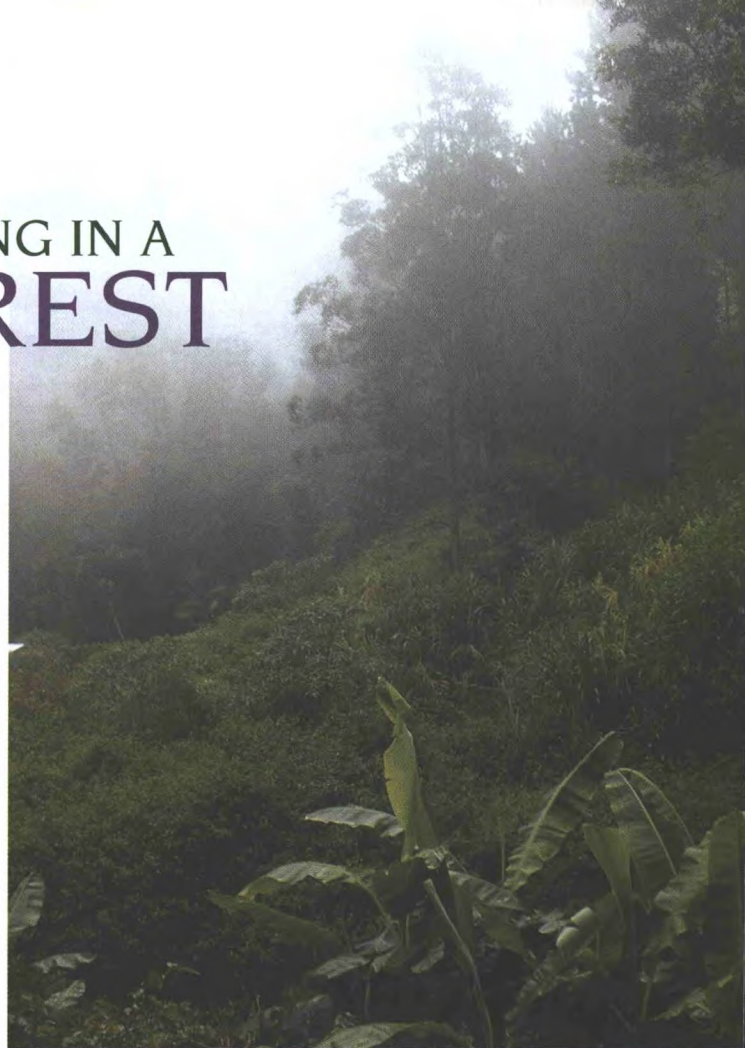
Most gardening manuals, including those devoted to organic practices, are very kind to things like cabbages and very callous to things like aphids. From a Buddhist perspective it doesn't make much difference whether a 'pest' (i.e., sentient being) is slaughtered by toxic chemicals or by homemade, organically prepared home-grown sprays.

I live in sub-tropical Australia where the landscape produces two growing seasons a year, 90 inches of rain, weeds which are trees, where the environment is composed of wall-to-wall sentient beings, and where entire forests can establish themselves within the space of a couple of decades. Short of protecting a gardening space with concentric circles of bird-netting, wire and roofing iron, there is little one can do to prevent trees and plants being ravaged by insect, birds and various mammals. It's impossible to measure the worth of a sentient being in broccoli. Racking up an arsenal of sprays, poisons and baits in order to protect vegetables by massacring insects seems like an odd set of priorities.

Gardening in a tropical climate, one can become quickly aware of the ephemeral quality of the process and outcomes of gardening. Nothing stays the same for more than a few weeks, and a lengthy wet season can demolish gardens, waterlog trees, collapse landscaping, and give the world's most ferocious weeds license to eat everything in their path. It doesn't make sense to get massively attached to a process that's going to get wiped out on a regular basis. There isn't anything left to do except garden without worrying about the outcomes too much, and thinking more closely about those sentient beings who already live there.

In a location like mine, where the ecology has always been considered fragile, and where environmental values are held to be paramount, killing introduced pest species so that indigenous species can thrive is almost a sacred law. But in a long-term perspective, (over millions of years) the boundaries between 'pest' and 'indigene' become a little blurred. Given enough time even the most solid-seeming designation will change. It's the long-term perspective that Buddhists are interested in. There isn't any other perspective to take. To kill a toad to save a frog seems a little strange from a perspective that's anything longer than millennia. Such an action seems to require that the universe remain stable, unchanging, permanent and still.

The Buddhist gardener seems to me to be someone who doesn't 'garden' at all. That is to say, to garden within that framework is to not worry about 'gardening' at all, but perhaps to begin to recognise that all things are questionable, even ordinary and mundane things – or perhaps especially ordinary and mundane things. ☸



Photos Stephen Wright



Stephen Wright is a student of Geshe Ngawang Gendun, who established the Australian Tibetan Buddhist Centre. He teaches pre-school and lives on the intentional community of Tuntable Falls in northern New South Wales, Australia.