

ME AND MY GARDENS

Adedotun Adekile

No. 6, Road 28, Oyo State Housing Corporation, Basorun Estate, Akobo, Ibadan.

Corresponding Author E-mail: dotunadekile@gmail.com

Last Christmas day, through to the second week of the New Year, every evening, our garden was enveloped in a strong sweet scent. For several nights, I could not locate the source. One evening, I decided to investigate by sniffing every plant in the vicinity of the scent. I discovered it was coming from the snake plant. I never expected such an unassuming plant, which I treat with indifference, could have such a powerful scent. The snake plant is also called “mother-In-law's tongue”, which I think is rather cheeky, particularly when my mother-in-law is around. I prefer “snake plant”. I learnt from the literature that snake plants bloom once in a decade, usually when under stress for water and nutrients. So this was a rare event.

The snake plant is one of the few plants in the Nigerian garden that are native to Nigeria and not introduced from other climes. A great percentage of the plants in Nigerian gardens were brought in by the early Portuguese explorers, colonialists, missionaries and in recent times, local travellers. The gardens we see today are a mark of how colonisation and travelling have influenced the local landscape and lifestyle.



Snake plant



Canna lily

My good neighbour at Akobo, Ibadan, Professor David Okpako, a revered member of the Nigerian Field Society, passed away in September 2020. In the course of the preparations for the funeral, his son, Edore was at a meeting in our house. He took a walk round the garden. The next thing was Pat Oyelola, his mother's friend, asking me at Professor Okpako's lying-in-state if she could see our garden, so she did, and on a second visit she asked if I would contribute an article to the Nigerian Field titled 'Me and My Gardens'. That was the genesis of this article.

In the present hectic urban lifestyle, a garden around the home offers a private refuge for relaxation, an opportunity for physical exercise and an expression of one's creativity. It also provides a place for meditation and spiritual sustenance. It breaks the monotony of the concrete around us and brings nature to our door steps: birds, butterflies, squirrels, lizards, toads, frogs and snails are attracted by the plants. Nature and mankind come into perfect harmony in a garden. For a young family, it is a playing and learning ground for the children. We are lucky that we live in the tropics, with an all year sunny weather and plenty of rainfall. One only needs to stick in a cutting or spread some seeds on the ground, water, weed and a garden emerges.

I have been gardening for over forty years. I cannot recall exactly when my interest in gardening began. Probably it was always there. I grew up surrounded by a garden. My childhood home was situated in a remote part of Ibadan, surrounded on three sides by schools and on the fourth side by bush. All the schools had gardens. Gardening and nature study were part of the school curriculum in those days. It was in secondary school that I first heard the word 'horticulture'. Our house master suggested we started a horticultural society so that the house could win the monthly garden competition. The society was never founded in my time but fifty years later, I went back to the school to establish a horticultural society.

My parents started one of the early private schools in Ibadan in the sixties and we lived on the premises. Our nearest neighbours, and only in one direction, were half a kilometre away. In all the other directions there were no houses. I recall my father, who died when I was ten years old, planting hibiscus hedges and several citrus trees around the house. My younger brother and I used to trail behind him as he worked in the garden. I read somewhere recently that when planting cuttings they should be inserted in the soil at an angle to the ground and not vertically. I remember that my father did the very same. A lawn mower was in our house before a fridge or television. Although that might have been due to a lack of electricity in our remote part of the town and not necessarily the order of priority!

My big sister came back from the UK when our father died and she continued from where he left off. She planted a hedge of casuarina around the house. In a semicircular bed, surrounded by block work, which my father had started, she planted canna lilies and ixora. That bed remains till today, maintained by my younger brother's widow who lives in the house.

Before I was twelve, I could recognise hibiscus, rose periwinkle, casuarina, bougainvillea, Pride of Barbados and allamanda. These were the common plants of that era, and found in many homes and school gardens.



Pride of Barbados



Ixora



Allamanda



White Bougainvillea

The plants of my childhood

Pride of Barbados was quite popular among the children. We used to eat the thin translucent film (cotyledon) lining the inside of the seed-pods. We called it “eko omode”. It was tasteless and not really filling. One wonders why several generations of school children were attracted to it. I was surprised recently to read somewhere that the flower is toxic. Ignorance may be bliss but we suffered no ill effect.

When I started work in 1980, I lived in a two bedroom apartment in Ikorodu town, Lagos State. There was no space for a garden but before I bought much furniture, I got a potted diffenbachia. I put the pot in a basket and placed it on the bookshelf. It enlivened the rather drab sitting room. The bookshelf was the only other piece of furniture, apart from the dining table and chairs. I eventually acquired several potted plants on the veranda including the rubber plant, alocasia green velvet, silver net leaf and maiden hair fern.



Rubber plant (*Ficus elastica*)



Alocasia Green Velvet



Maiden Hair Fern

I moved to Bauchi in 1987. I had a bungalow with a big compound and bare grounds. After negotiating the dreadful Lagos traffic, it was rather strange to finish work at 4.30 pm and be home at 4.35 pm. The evening stretched endlessly ahead. To fill the space, I started collecting plants and taming the grounds around me. It was my first attempt at proper gardening. It was in Bauchi that I established the style of gardening I still follow till today, a sort of segmental gardening. The garden is divided into sections with different themes. A section for a formal garden, a section for an informal garden and a section for the kitchen garden, allowing each segment to evolve with additional plants and inspiration. Several plants are also grown in containers which can be moved around as required. Our present garden in Ibadan could easily be broken into twelve different sections. I use the segmental pattern to demonstrate to beginners that however small their space, they can have a garden even if everywhere is covered with concrete.

Bauchi houses at the time did not have wall fences so I planted thevetia, a shrub, around the perimeter of the compound to provide a screen. Next to the thevetia, I planted a hedge of acalypha. I also planted roses, Pride of Barbados, frangipani, orange and lemon trees. I filled the veranda with potted plants. Some of the potted plants eventually travelled with me to my next

home in Kaduna and then finally to Ibadan. There is a dracaena that has been with me for thirty four years.

Bauchi was full of expatriates in the eighties: English contractors and consultants, Canadian volunteers, Phillipino and Indian teachers and doctors. Many were interested in gardening. Within the first rainy season, my garden was getting noticed and attracting visitors who made encouraging comments. Most of the plants came from the neighbourhood but any time I went to Jos, I took the opportunity to forage for new plants. Jos has always been a gardener's haven, a tradition that started with the missionaries and tin miners who settled there long before Independence. My good friends, Steve Akiga, of blessed memory, and his wife Linda, were very keen gardeners. I learnt a lot from them. For many years they won the Jos Horticultural Society Garden Competition. Linda ran a garden centre. It was a must-stop for me whenever I was in Jos, even many years after I had left Bauchi. Steve went on to become the Minister of Sports, and later, Police Affairs under Chief Olusegun Obasanjo's administration. He sadly passed away shortly afterwards.

I learnt a very important lesson in gardening by accident in Bauchi. Friends of mine came visiting with their two sons. The children were left to play in the garden. When we came out, I found they had been using their school rulers to take the heads off my young acalypha hedge. I was furious. However, a week after, I found the 'pruned' plants were branching out and were thicker than the ones untouched by the boys. Lesson learnt: to grow a thick hedge, prune it!

I later learnt more about the importance of pruning. All plants grown for their flowers, such as roses, oleander, bougainvillea, lantana and Pride of Barbados should be pruned as soon as the petals drop. If not, the absorbed nutrients and energy would be used to produce unwanted and inedible fruits. If pruned, they are back in bloom within a few weeks.

Water was often in short supply in Bauchi. I had to develop several means of getting water for the plants. I would save used water from the kitchen, laundry and bathrooms. I would collect water dripping from the condensation of air conditioners both in the house and the office. In the rainy season I collected rain water. I only watered, and still do, when the plants definitely needed water. Those in containers, I water when the top two centimetres of the soil is dry to the touch. For those in the ground, when they show some sign of wilting.

A major challenge for many gardeners in the tropics is that there are not many books to use as a guide or reference. It is all done by trial and error and learning from fellow gardeners. Most of the available books originated from the temperate region, with information that was not always helpful. However, when I started, I was lucky to come across a book titled *Gardening in Kaduna* published in 1984 by the Kaduna Branch of the Nigerian Field Society. It was a revision of an earlier book, the *ABC of Gardening and Planting in Kaduna* by Major J.C. Hill, published in 1957. *Gardening in Kaduna*, a practical handbook written in very simple language, became

my constant companion. I still have the copy I bought in 1987. I am presently trying to fill the gap in the literature on tropical gardening by writing a book titled *Gardening in Nigeria*.

For the beginner, mustering the necessary knowledge and skills to create a garden may be daunting. A shaky start is often made, as in my case but within a surprisingly short time, the basics are mastered. Control is the essence of gardening. Somebody said 'a garden is nature organised by man for man'. The beginner should strive for simplicity of the garden design and harmony of the plants. The smaller the garden the better because it is easier to exercise control over a small garden than a large one, though where resources are available there is no limit to the size. Each plant should be well displayed. The four simple rules I follow, which are probably the universal rules of gardening are: (i) Find the right soil, loamy soil most of the time. (ii) Keep the plants in good health by applying manure and regular watering. (iii) Keep weeds to a minimum; all brown or yellowing leaves must be removed. (iv) Plant as much variety of plants as possible. I choose plants either for their flowers, foliage or fragrance but sometimes just for sheer nostalgia, because they are the plants of my youth.

I buy seedlings from commercial nurseries that abound along the road sides of many of the major cities. I also 'borrow' cuttings and seeds from friends. Another source is salvaging plants that are thrown out by householders pruning their plants. For instance, when we first moved to Ibadan, I was driving past a house, in front of which I saw a heap of croton cuttings. I stopped to ask the owner if I could have some. He said I could have all of them, I was doing him a favour! The result can be seen in the pictures below. Whenever I stay in a hotel, I get friendly with the gardeners. They are usually generous with their knowledge and with the plants. When travelling, I am always on the lookout for new plants and garden ornaments. Plant hunting is great fun.



Ibadan: The outcome of the salvaged crotons

I moved to Kaduna in 1990. The first house I lived in was owned by Costain Construction, a well-established construction company in Nigeria. It was a duplex with expansive grounds and a big swimming pool. It has now been turned into a hotel. As soon as I moved in, I set to the task of conquering my patch of the compound. My neighbours were an English couple, Roy and Thelma Coomber. As I was breaking the ground, Thelma came out and asked what I was doing. I said I was sowing some seeds and planning to make a garden. She said I was wasting my time, that the soil was dead. She and Roy had had it tested. Nothing would grow in it. I remember thinking, 'Thank you Thelma for letting me know'. The following day, I went to the Polo Club stables and got a truck load of horse manure and spread it on the ground. That evening, and for the next few days, the compound stank to high heavens. Roy and Thelma were not amused.

I set to planting in my style. A formal garden in front with a border or hedge around a lawn and an informal garden at the back, where the plants are not in any particular order except for colour coordination and the hierarchy of the plants. In no time an oasis emerged. Roy and Thelma started coming around for drinks in the evening. Sometimes they would come with friends, telling them I was born with green fingers as I had conjured a garden from dead soil. I would disagree and say that it was just a combination of interest, manure, water, and sunlight.

An unforgettable incident happened in my early days in the Costain Compound. I suddenly noticed a plant growing in the back garden, which I knew I did not sow. There were four of the same plant, placed almost equidistant in a grid. I thought it was a weed and should be removed. Olive green, glossy leaves, the stem tapering gracefully upwards like a Christmas tree plant. The plant was quite attractive and blended in with my informal style. So I tended and watered it like all the other plants. One day, a friend came visiting and met me watering these plants. Looking bemused, shaking his head, he said 'Dotun, I am a bit confused because I have never seen you smoking'. 'Of course not, I don't smoke', I said. 'Then why are you growing Indian hemp?' he asked. The penny dropped. As I was planting my formal and informal beds, my houseboy was growing his own vegetable in between them. Needless to say he was sacked straightaway. The positive outcome of this incident is that it turned me into an amateur botanist. From then, I always research in detail every plant I grow.

A year after, Roy and Thelma moved out and I got married. My wife and I moved into their wing of the duplex because it was more spacious than the one I occupied as a bachelor. We decided to build our own house and move out of the Costain compound by the end of the year when the lease ran out. There was therefore no point in trying to work the dead soil Thelma and Roy left behind. I started growing everything in pots and whatever containers I could lay my hands on. I ended up with two hundred pots.

When we moved to our house, I broke several of the pots and transplanted the contents to the ground. An instant garden emerged. A few pots were retained and placed on the veranda. Some months after we moved in, Thelma was trying to locate us. As soon as she saw a house with lots of pots, she knew she was in the right place. I am one for growing plants in pots because one can control all the elements the plant requires.

In spite of the 'instant' garden we kept working on it. One day, Bunmi, my wife, came in with two avocado seedlings. I told her not to bother as the avocado takes seven years to fruit and we were not going to be in the house for seven years, so she did not bother. In the end we lived there for twenty four years!

In Kaduna, I was project manager on a rural water supply project. The groundwater potential of about a thousand villages had to be evaluated to supply them with safe drinking water through boreholes. Groundwater availability depends on the underlying geology. We had six field geologists working on the project. As the project manager, it was not possible for me to visit all the villages so I asked the geologists to bring rock samples from the field for me to get a feel of the field conditions. In no time a pile of rocks accumulated in the office. How were we going to get rid of them? I had the inspiration to build a rock garden. I started taking the rocks a few at a time back to the house, and with them, I built my first rock garden. Over the years, I added rocks from all over Nigeria and planted a wide variety of plants including miniature roses, various cacti, aloe vera, impatiens, begonia, geranium and whatever caught my fancy and was available.



Kaduna: Adesewa, our first daughter,
with the rock garden in the background



Kaduna: Morning glory trailing on the railings



Kaduna: Potted plants on the veranda



Kaduna: Moyo, our second daughter, posing as a Fulani girl with the lawn in the background

The Kaduna house was built on one of the lower terraces of the Kaduna River floodplain. The water table was very shallow, never more than one meter below surface. This was both a blessing and a challenge. The two lawns we had were always green. During Christmas parties, the guests would wonder at how much water was expended to keep it so green. But In the rainy season, the water became overwhelming and several plants suffered root rot and died. As a result, I grew several plants in containers. The rockery was also very successful because it was raised. I grew a lot of roses in raised beds. However, many other plants adapted to the wet ground. For example, a hedge of casuarina thrived, although after several years of clipping, the stems became knotted and unsightly. They were replaced with weeping fig which were also successful. Over the twenty four years we lived in the house, I grew various plants, like the golden palm, oleander, tecoma, papyrus, Indian almond, mango, orange, guava and others.

The water-logged ground was eventually conquered after several years by laying underground pipes to drain the water away but by then it was time to move. I always enjoy telling people that the person who bought our Kaduna house never entered the house till we handed over the keys. He just walked round the garden. A few weeks after, he paid. It was the garden that sold the house.

We moved into our Ibadan house in 2014, forty years after I left Ibadan. The grounds are about four times the size of those we left behind in Kaduna. It was a welcomed challenge. I soon became a regular feature at several of the garden centres around Ibadan. Whilst construction was still going on, I decided to tackle the set back from the road outside the fence. I got manure from Bodija market, levelled the ground and planted Port Harcourt grass to make the lawn. There is a row of dwarf ixora in front, behind which is a row of thuja interspersed with oleander and Pride of Barbados. In the centre of this assemblage, there is a red frangipani. The cutting from which the frangipani was planted came from Hawaii. My older brother travelled from his home in Kuwait to Hawaii and bought the cutting as a gift for me. He travelled back to Kuwait with it and then to Nigeria. By the time the cutting arrived in Ibadan I reckoned it had logged thirty thousand kilometres. Alas, I already had a red frangipani growing in the garden but I just had to find a place of abode for this much travelled specimen.

We moved into the house, in May in the rainy season. That year, I concentrated on tackling the front part of the house. I created a lawn, dotted with Araucaria, Indian almond, thuja, weeping fig, oleander, Sago palm and beach hibiscus. The focal plant is the oleander but it could have been any of the others. The oleander won because it was the only truly 'flowering' plant amongst all the others. I constantly prune the trees to control the canopy and thereby control the root systems which otherwise could cause structural damage to the house over time.



Ibadan: The set back from the road, outside the fence Ibadan: The front garden

The house had stood uncompleted for many years when we bought it. The block work fence was black and grimy with age and we had no money for plastering and painting. To take attention off the grime and cover it, I grew on one side a row of weeping fig and on the other a row of tecoma. These were plants that would grow quickly. When we hosted the neighbourhood meeting the following November, the guests made delightful and encouraging comments about the garden. But I kept thinking to myself there was still lot of work ahead. We had only tackled one quarter of the grounds. Over the next three years the other sides of the house were conquered.

As I write, we have been in the house for seven years. The garden is established. There are four lawns and hundreds of plants. There is a rock garden. I did not have the luxury of rocks being brought in from the field as in Kaduna. I bought the rocks from a quarry, and one Sunday morning, laid them out in the desired pattern, filled them up with soil and started planting. The ornamental plants in the garden include lantana, coleus, anthurium, syngonium, rose periwinkle, agloanema, monstera, cordyline, various dracaenas and hibiscuses and many others. I cannot mention them all. There are two hundred and thirty species in our garden, some of which are repeated several times. One often has to plant many of the same together for people to see it, like a repetition for emphasis.

Apart from the ornamental plants, there are fruit trees. I did not make the mistake I made in Kaduna and I knew we were here to stay so I planted an avocado tree as soon as we moved in and it fruited for the first time this year. There are also mango, orange, avocado, lemon, guava, soursop, shaddock, grape, banana and plantain. In the past, we grew tomatoes, okra and

peppers but for the past three years I have concentrated on turmeric. We keep half a dozen rabbits for the manure and we also compost the garden waste. The pictures below shed more light on my narration.



Ibadan: The second lawn, with the rock garden in the background



Ibadan: Rock garden



Ibadan: The informal garden, north of the house



Ibadan: Continuation of the informal garden north of the house

Every garden I have established has had a challenge or a drawback. In Bauchi, it was lack of water. In Kaduna, it was too much water. In Ibadan, it is termites. The termites are everywhere and are very voracious. They damage and kill the plants in no time. One has to be very vigilant,

inspecting every plant every day to make sure the termites have not got their jaws into them overnight. I refrain from wholesale pesticide spraying of the garden so as not to kill beneficial insects and organisms but I do carry out point spraying on plants being attacked by termites. Somehow we are winning. We still have a garden but left to the termites we would not.

Many people ask me to help them establish a garden. I tell them it is very easy to establish one, but are they prepared to tend the garden. To keep and maintain a garden requires commitment, passion and a spiritual connection between the garden and the gardener. Without that, the garden is just a collection of plants. Gardening is a permanent work of art in progress. It never ends. It thrives when it is in a constant state of flux. The work is demanding but for the gardener it is a labour of love. After all the planting, weeding, watering, raking, it is always a joy to wake up in the morning and wonder what surprise awaits one in the garden, what is sprouting, what is in bloom. And then to behold a new flower!!



Ibadan: Another view of the garden



Ibadan: 2020 turmeric harvest

Acknowledgement

Thanks to the former editor of the Nigerian Field, Dr. Pat Oyelola, for inviting me to contribute the article to the journal.

Thanks also to my wife and daughters for their encouragement and enjoying the gardens in our two homes.

The botanical names of the plants mentioned in the article are provided in the appendix. They were deliberately not included in the text so as not to make the reading tedious.

Appendix: Botanical names of the plants in the text

Common Name	Botanical Name
Acalypha	<i>Acalypha hispida</i>
Agloanema	<i>Agloanema</i> spp.
Allamanda	<i>Allamanda cathartica</i>
Alocasia Green Velvet	<i>Alocasia micholitziana</i>
Aloe Vera	<i>Aloe barbadensis</i>
Anthurium	<i>Anthurium</i> spp.
Araucaria	<i>Araucaria heterophylla</i>
Avocado	<i>Persea Americana</i>
Beach Hibiscus	<i>Hibiscus tiliaceus</i>
Begonia	<i>Begonia</i> spp.
Bougainvillea	<i>Bougainvillea spectabilis</i>
Canna lily	<i>Canna indica</i>
Casuarina	<i>Casuarina equisetifolia</i>
Cordyline	<i>Cordyline fruticosa</i>
Coleus	<i>Coleus</i> spp.
Croton	<i>Codiaeum variegatum</i>
Diffenbachia	<i>Diffenbachia</i> spp.
Dracaena	<i>Dracaena</i> spp.
Frangipani	<i>Plumeria</i> spp.
Geranium	<i>Geranium</i>
Golden palm	<i>Dypsis lutescens</i>
Hibiscus	<i>Hibiscus rosa sinensis</i>
Impatiens	<i>Impatiens</i> spp.
Indian almond	<i>Terminalia catappa</i>
Indian hemp	<i>Cannabis sativum</i>
Ixora	<i>Ixora coccinea</i>
Lantana	<i>Lantana camara</i>
Lemon	<i>Citrus limon</i>
Maidenhair fern	<i>Adiantum</i> spp.
Mango	<i>Mangifera indica</i>
Monstera	<i>Monstera</i> spp.
Morning Glory	<i>Ipomea</i> spp.
Oleander	<i>Nerium oleander</i>
Orange	<i>Citrus sinensis</i>
Papyrus	<i>Cyperus papyrus</i>
Pride of Barbados	<i>Caesalpinia pulcherrima</i>
Rose	<i>Rosa</i>
Rose periwinkle	<i>Catharanthus roseus</i>
Rubber plant	<i>Ficus elastica</i>
Sago Palm	<i>Cycas revoluta</i>
Silver net leaf	<i>Fittonia albivensis</i>
Snake plant	<i>Dracaena trifasciata</i>
Syngonium	<i>Syngonium podophyllum</i>
Tecoma	<i>Tecoma stans</i>
Thevetia	<i>Thevetia nerifolia</i>
Thuja	<i>Thuja orientalis</i>
Weeping fig	<i>Ficus benjamina</i>