Bouquet of butterflies at balcony

Get the right combination and you have a garden of winged delights right in a Kolkata home, writes Shounak Ghosal

A few trees can’t make a forest but a few plants can sure create a garden. How, you ask? With butterflies, of course!

Flowers always light up a balcony or terrace. But what if one was able to place specific flowering plants that attract butterflies — turn it into a garden of colours? A bunch of ‘butterfly doctors’ have been doing exactly that, creating butterfly gardens across Kolkata. You just need a bit of open space and get the combination right, and voila, you have a butterfly garden at your home, they promise.

“There are various plants, mostly indigenous, which attract a lot of butterflies. From a few square feet to a hectare of land can be dedicated to create a butterfly garden. Even a regular-sized balcony can be used for this,” says “butterfly doctor” Sarika Baidya of green organization Nature Mates.

So far, the butterfly effect can be felt at Banobitan, Salt Lake, Eden Garden, Maidan (opposite Chatterjee International), Presidency College campus, Diocesan school, Tantia Bari, Phoolbagan, a private residence at Ballygunge and several other city hot spots. So it’s possible to play parent to these winged delights, nurture them and, finally, there’s that moment when they spread their wings!

But is it necessary to devote a lot of time to the butterfly garden or does nature do the job? “At the initial stage, we have to take care of all the requisites, till eventually it becomes a natural garden. Once it does, it develops its own regeneration dynamics,” explains Sarika. So a preliminary survey, followed by selection of focal species (a species primarily benefited by a project), then plantation according to the requirement and you’re all set.

“We want people to love and learn about nature. Nature doesn’t only mean elephants, rhinos and tigers. Urban eco-system is made of insects, butterflies and microorganisms. And a big space is not needed at all. Even a small open space with nayantara or karabi plants can attract butterflies,” says Nilanjan Mallick, conservator of forest, parks and garden circle, West Bengal. “Those who are interested can get a first-hand experience at Banobitan. Over 45 species of butterflies have completed their entire lifecycle — from egg to maturity — here. This is the easiest way to connect with nature,” he adds.

Sarika points out: “In Kolkata, we have representatives from all the six families of butterflies. Around 120 species of butterflies have been recorded so far from the extended Kolkata limit, out of which 60-70 species are regularly seen in different parts of the city.” Is the process very complicated? “For the butterfly doctors, it’s easy but not casual work. Sincere passion and expertise is needed to make a butterfly garden purposeful and presentable. But one doesn’t need exotic plants or flowers for a butterfly garden. Plants like lantana, castor plant, curry leaf and certain varieties of lemon and oleanalder work perfectly,” she replies.

Advocate and socio-cultural activist Avik Saha, who is the proud owner of a butterfly garden at his Ballygunge residence, is all smiles. “When I first learnt I could set up a butterfly garden at my balcony with just 10 potted plants, I was super excited. Seeing my excitement, my wife jokingly asked whether I wanted to marry again; after all, butterflies are the motif of marriage in our culture. Marriage or no marriage, just the thought that I would be able to see multi-coloured butterflies fluttering over the small patches of greenery in my balcony, filled my mind with joy. Today, when I sip my morning tea and watch the rainbow of butterflies in my balcony, my day starts full of energy and joy. A complete eco-system has developed on my balcony — squirrels and birds come free with a butterfly garden,” he gushes. “I even set up one in my high court office which has bloomed into a real beauty. A few potted plants and as little as Rs 2,000 is enough to start this garden. Instead of useless consumer goods, I now gift butterfly gardens on marriages, anniversaries and birthdays,” he says.

And the cutest bit? The youngest butterfly doctor in the Nature Mates team is Tara Dasgupta, 8. Her sister Antara, 11, is also an active larvae nurturer. “Tara is an expert larvae spotter,” the elder sister declares with a proud smile.