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A plant waits for its patrons



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As Delhi residents for the past 34 years, my wife and I know that finding curry leaves is a big challenge in the city. For south Indians like us, curry leaves (*Murraya koenigii*) are an integral part of our dishes such as *upma*, *sambar* and *rasam*.

Compared with those in the north, we use significantly higher quantities of the green leaves. But these are not available in all vegetable markets of Delhi, and one needs to go to larger markets away from residential areas. Recently, flower sellers at temples frequented by south Indian devotees have started stocking them.

Fifteen years ago, we bought a sapling of curry leaves and began raising it in our balcony to meet the needs of our nuclear family. We bought a large cement tank with a long-term plan as this plant is a perennial variety and could become a tree over time. My wife was taking extra care by adding vermi-compost and bio-mulching to save it in Delhi's hot summer.

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housing society in Dwarka, and a few families started asking for the leaves. My wife gives them away with a smile.

After I retired from my job of 33 years in Delhi, we have to frequently travel now. Maintaining 50 pots of various plants in the three balconies of our apartment has thus become challenging. My wife is emotionally connected with the plants, and she has raised seasonal flowering varieties and a good collection of profusely growing money plants. We do grow vegetables as our hobby. Every morning, she walks straight into these balconies and look at the plants with care and affection. Hence, we had to evolve a pragmatic strategy to manage them when we are away.

Plant guardians

As my wife maintains strong social relationships in the housing society, she could allot 10 pots each to five families to take care of them during our absence. It helped that two of the families live on the ground floor with an adjacent open lawn.

This made our task relatively easier as our travels range from one to two months. Once back in Delhi, we shift them back to our balconies. Since the curry-leaf pot was large and heavy (about 160 kg of soil and the weight of the cement tank), shifting it frequently was not easy. We used to leave the plant to its fate with a heavy heart. Fortunately, the plant has survived and remained our perennial source for curry leaves.

A time has come for us last year when we had to lock our apartment for more than four months to live in our home town near Hyderabad. Following our standard operating procedure, we moved the plants to pre-designated families. We both looked at the curry leaf plant and fondly touched the leaves. My wife's eyes became moist and with a heavy heart, we threw our last glimpses at the fondly grown plant. We left Delhi in the third week of December 2018 and returned only in the last week of April 2019, after 130 days.

Once the main door was opened, my wife ran inside and opened the door to the balcony. And lo, the plant was alive, though a few leaves at the top began wilting. Leaves on the lower side were still green and fresh! My wife took a second run to the tap, bought a bucket of water and irrigated the thirsty soil and plant.

We thought the plant would die by the time we return, as there was a prolonged water stress. It survived to our surprise. We have now decided that though it is challenging, we will move the large pot to the ground and transplant the plant in our society's compound where the gardener will take care of it. Let it grow from plant to tree and meet the needs of all residents of the housing society.

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