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In gardener's paradise, never ending project is a labor of love

HANNAH FISKE Jun 17, 2001



Actress Megan Fox participates in a press conference for the film "Jennifer's Body" during the Toronto International Film Festival in Toronto. AP Photo

One area gardener, drawing inspiration from Native Americans and his native country, has a new solution to the "same-old-plants" syndrome.

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Raj Shetty of Schwenksville, an alum of the Montgomery County Master Gardener program, has filled his lush garden with squashes the size and shape of baseball bats, green beans that mature to nearly two feet in length and papaw trees, an "exotic" fruit traditionally grown by Native Americans.

Born in Mangalore, in southern India, Shetty moved to Pennsylvania in 1973. He retired from his position as a medical technician in December, and has been gardening full time ever since.

"I always gardened in India, even when I was younger," Shetty recalled. "My father was a doctor, but my family were farmers. They grew rice, tropical fruits, mangoes, cashews."

When he arrived in the United States, the avid gardener had the opportunity to try some new fruits - like apples - and vegetables - such as broccoli - things most Americans consider staples but which were not available in his native India.

Still, Shetty found there was something missing. "I couldn't find anything here that we had in India," he explained. "Things like certain squash and green beans, which are different than what you have here."

A soft-spoken man whose eyes light up when he steps into his garden, Shetty found a way to keep his hands in the soil, even when he was living in an apartment complex.

"I found that each county had garden spots - they gave a little piece of tilled land to gardeners, so I gardened there. It's just the pleasure of gardening for its own sake that I love," he said. "Just the pleasure of growing your own crop, to have access to fresh fruits and vegetables you may or may not find elsewhere."

Shetty and his wife, Kathi, moved into their Schwenksville home three years ago, and found themselves in a gardener's paradise. Native blackberries and apples grew wild, and plants and trees planted by a previous owner could be incorporated into their own garden plan.

But Shetty also saw the opportunity to bring some of his favorites from India into his home, in addition to exploring his interest in the fruits and vegetables grown by Native Americans.

"I always wanted to learn more (about horticulture)," he said. "The Master Gardener program is good access for me to learn more about that and what grows here. It gave me a better outlook on what grows around here, soil testing and different weeds of the area."

"I always wanted to see what the locals grew that is native to this country," he continued. "I just kind of tried to grow what American Indians grew. I try to blend in the unusual and incorporate it into the local stuff."

One example of produce native to the area is the Papaw tree, a kind of "exotic" fruit that is not frequently sold at market because of its short shelf life. The size of a mango, Papaw fruit "tastes like a combination banana-mango," Shetty said. "You can cook with it, but mostly the American Indians ate it raw."

He also experimented successfully with vegetables grown in India, "vegetables I knew about from my country, like certain squashes that look like a baseball bat."

Called "dudia" in his homeland, the Indian squash has the consistency of zucchini with a sweeter taste, according to Shetty. His latest experiment is Malabar spinach, which grows on a vine and tastes slightly different from other members of the spinach family.

The homegrown seeds for his exotic plants have come from as far away as Houston, Texas, where Shetty's sister grows her own exotic plants. He also purchases seeds from importers, harvests them from the plants he grows and exchanges seeds and cuttings with fellow gardeners.

"We share things," he explained. "We share the food with friends, co-workers, other gardeners. It's interesting, the different varieties of flavors and textures - (the) spices you prepare them with are so different."

"I always had a curry plant," (also called a neem plant) Shetty continued. "They're used like bay leaves in cooking. It's a tropical tree, but I bring it inside in the winter. You work with the plants - if it's not possible to grow them outside, you can always bring it inside."

"There are certain things I wouldn't even try," he said. "Coconut trees, mango trees - but there are very few things that I know won't work."

What has been his biggest challenge?

"Certain squashes," he answered. "The growing period is not long enough here. I'll probably try it again sometime in the future when I have a greenhouse."

In return for the hours of instruction provided by the Master Gardener program, Shetty donates time back to the county in the form of instruction. Currently, he is working with a group of people at an apartment complex who want to learn the basics of gardening.

"It's not that hard. It's simple once you know the basics and what (people) can get out of it is self-satisfaction. It's therapeutic once you get into it.

"(Gardening) is my way to relax after a stressful day," Shetty continued. "There's nothing like digging something, getting outside. I do it, right now, probably 10 hours a day."

As he surveys his garden, Shetty's expression is affectionate. "My baby, probably, is the Papaw, because of its notoriety. It's something I'm really trying to get into. It's a local fruit with an exotic flavor, and it reminds me of mangoes and other tropical fruits (from India)."

"It's a never ending project," Kathi Shetty explained. "As soon as you think you have it the way you like it, your tastes change."

Suiting different tastes should never be a problem in the Shettys' garden though, where giant beans and exotic squashes from halfway around the world thrive next to local plants like apples, blueberries and cabbage.

And don't forget the papaws.

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