

# The Guardian

## A&E for trees: pioneering clinic in India provides lifeline for poorly plants

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Sahib Singh clammers up a portable ladder, reaches out and, with the help of a few tools, tugs at the banyan tree and successfully removes it. The uprooted plant, which had sprouted from a wall inside the living room, is placed in a plastic bag filled with fertilised black soil. “We will replant this on the hospital lawn,” Singh says over Skype, while climbing back down the ladder. The operation lasts barely 20 minutes.



Some of the team at the Pushpa Tree and Plant Hospital and Dispensary with one of the tree ambulances converted from electric rickshaws. Photograph: Handout

The removal of the banyan tree, considered sacred in Hinduism, is the first of three calls attended by Singh in his tree ambulance on one day in May. He is a gardener and part of the team at the Pushpa Tree and Plant Hospital and Dispensary, in the northern Indian city of Amritsar, launched in January 2020.

The hospital's team of botanists, forestry experts, gardeners, volunteers and tree surgeons provide free services to people who need help protecting the city's biodiversity. They replant uprooted trees, take care of the dying ones and ward off insect attacks from the fields. Sometimes, the trees are transplanted to more suitable locations.

“We provide about 33 kinds of plant-related services to people who call our helpline,” says Rohit Mehra, a civil servant and the brains behind the hospital. “When our lives are endangered, we have ambulances to ferry us to hospital, but what about plants that are so critical to our planet's survival?”

The hospital owns three tree ambulances – electric rickshaws that have been repurposed and stocked with gardening tools, a portable ladder and an array of plant medicines, fertilisers and growth tonics kept in neat plastic containers.

Rohit's wife, Geetanjali Mehra, an environmentalist working with the hospital, says: “We use only organic and ayurvedic herbs to make medicines, pesticides and fertilisers to cure plant-related ailments like retarded growth, pest infestations and deformities.

“We use herbs like neem, cinnamon bark, ashwagandha [Indian ginseng], moringa [drumstick powder], as well as fruit and vegetable peels to make our medicines. Neem oil mixed with water in a 70-30 ratio makes for an excellent insecticide, as well as a tonic for plants.”

The hospital also refers to ancient textbooks such as the Vriksha Ayurveda, Panchratna and Vastu Shastra, which include recipes for plant medicines, and has compiled a manual on plant care. “Termite attacks are addressed by filling a mud pot with jaggery and burying it in the fields after covering its lid. After 15 days, all the insects find their way into the pot and the field becomes termite free. You simply have to remove the pot,” says Geetanjali.



Calls to the helpline are registered and attended to by the ambulance team, which includes a gardener, volunteer and biodiversity expert. For larger operations, more people are called into service. Three to four calls in neighbouring areas are answered in a day.

Singh's next stop is at the home of a resident with a cluster of neem trees which appear to be dying. Singh begins by carefully inspecting each tree. He then scratches their gnarly bark to take a closer look before bending down to examine the soil below.

After 15 minutes, the problem is diagnosed. “The trees have been poisoned,” Singh announces gravely. He summons his assistant to dig up the earth around the trees and remove it. Ten sacks of fresh soil mixed with herbs and fertilisers are brought in from the ambulance and poured around the trees. “The trees will be fine in a fortnight,” Singh says. There is a collective sigh of relief from the family congregated on the lawn. “The trees were planted by my father, who is no more, so they have sentimental value for all of us,” says the owner.

The next call is a five-minute drive away, where a six-year-old fruit-bearing apricot tree has been partly uprooted because of a dust storm the previous night. As the tree is gargantuan, extra help is required to lift and reset it.

Volunteer Ram Sevak calls the hospital for reinforcements. Within 15 minutes, three men arrive and, after a 90-minute struggle, the job is accomplished; Singh and his assistant manage to bed the tree firmly in the soil with the help of shovels and spades. As they mop their sweaty brows, a round of

applause breaks out. Finally, they fortify the soil with a herbal mixture and spray it with a solution of neem oil and water.

"It'll be fine; just take care that there is no insect infestation around it by spraying this herbal insecticide daily," the gardener advises, handing the homeowner three bottles of a brown pesticide. The owner thanks Singh profusely and offers him a 500-rupee (£5) tip.

But the hospital's work is not limited to the local area. "On average we get 20-30 calls daily from all over the world seeking solutions to various plant-related problems," says Rohit.

"Recently, we got a call from a school in Paris which wanted to fly us over to set up a similar hospital on their premises. Of course, we couldn't go, so we gave them guidelines over Skype."

Source: <https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2022/jun/14/ae-for-trees-pioneering-clinic-in-india-provides-lifeline-for-poorly-plants>