

## **What is THE GARDEN ESTATE?**

THE GARDEN ESTATE is our dream: a piece of land managed as natural as possible. Humans, animals and plants living together in harmony and to their benefit. THE GARDEN ESTATE shall be an oasis for all of us. With healthy soil, healthy food, healthy working conditions.

THE GARDEN ESTATE is a social eco farming project in Sri Lanka. Originally a brownfield site within about three years we have planted hundreds of plants (especially fruit trees and coconut palms), created a large lake, built a house from clay, bamboo and timber as well as established an independent energy supply with a small wind turbine and solar panels. Besides some hens and dogs have found a home at THE GARDEN ESTATE.

We refrain from using any artificial fertilizers and pesticides on THE GARDEN ESTATE. The name of the project shall be our program. Usually the "Estates" in Sri Lanka are planted very densely and in monoculture (e.g. with coconut trees). We are working to create a large and diverse garden. Therefore, we have planted the big trees in further distances than usual, so that in between space and light remains for mid and finally ground-level plants. Monocultures are known to leach the soil, since the same plants consume the same nutrients always. A special source of inspiration for the design and management of THE GARDEN ESTATE for us are also the ideas of permaculture.

The project gives people work and feeds them. The land shall be used, but in a natural cycle. We need to give back, what we remove from the soil in form of harvested plants and fruits. We "feed" the soil with mulch, compost and natural fertilizer. We give the soil to drink, as we have created water reservoirs that keep it moist during the dry seasons. We revive the soil by letting live large and small animals in and on it. Since we do not use insecticides, we now observe a rich insect life, followed by numerous birds and some snakes.

THE GARDEN ESTATE is adjacent to the largest national park in Sri Lanka – the Wilpattu Forest Reserve. Because elephants are living there, we have separated THE GARDEN ESTATE by a fence from the National Park. At night this fence uses electricity, that we generate with a solar cell and a small wind turbine and store in a car battery. So far there have been no problems with the elephants and at night they sometimes even can be observed. The smart animals can clearly sense electric fences. From the heart we can say that we do not take habitat or food sources from the elephants here. The National Park is huge and offers plenty of food for the large animals. However in between they also long for some delicious fruit and therefore occasionally leave their forest and try to snatch something from the adjacent fields.

Above all having a National Park next door for us means tranquility and the view towards a huge forest. Because of the natural slope of the landscape water flows from our property into the forest, so we have a great responsibility here. With the ecological management of THE GARDEN ESTATE, we do our part that less agricultural chemicals get into the National Park. We hope that our neighbours will take over more responsibility for the National Park if we can create a successful example with THE GARDEN ESTATE.

## **Who is THE GARDEN ESTATE?**

THE GARDEN ESTATE was founded by Suresh and Anne Dittrich. Suresh grew up in Sri Lanka, but is living in Europe since many years. Anne comes from Germany and has spent many months in Sri Lanka. The island is our second home. With our children we currently live in northern Germany and work in the field of renewable energies. So far we are financing THE GARDEN ESTATE merely from our salaries in Germany. If possible we are in Sri Lanka each year, in any case every two years. We are surrounded by friends and family around the world, who follow our vision, share the same values as well as support and encourage us with ideas, practical help and advice.

We have therefore found people on site, who work with us to turn THE GARDEN ESTATE into a green oasis. First of all Nilantha, Suresh's cousin works with us. He lives with his family under simple conditions in the newly built house on our land. Before working with us he has already been a farmer, but followed conventional farming methods. We are in constant phone contact with Nilantha, at least once a week we exchange all new developments and plan the next steps together. He keeps a diary with all the activities on site and sends us photos regularly via Internet.

In addition Sumith and Karune work for us. The two older men come from the village nearby and are happy to have a job with us. They take care of tasks such as distributing compost to the plants, keeping the fence in order and planting nitrogen-fixing plants.

Since a beautiful family house was built on THE GARDEN ESTATE this year, we can now accommodate guests. First volunteers have been with us and got their hands dirty helping on THE GARDEN ESTATE. The house has a separate guest room, adventurers also can camp at any time (tents are available). Nilantha's wife Chamerie is happy to welcome visitors and will treat them with her delicious and spicy curries. We appreciate every visitor at THE GARDEN ESTATE and anyone who would like to help actively. In the long term, we plan a well-considered tourist offer. We are dreaming of cabanas and tree houses with views towards the National Park - farm stay in an exotic version.

### **Why are we doing THE GARDEN ESTATE?**

Within about 30 years - since the Sri Lankan government has approved the import of seeds and fertilizers - almost the entire knowledge of local farmers about organic farming methods got lost. We are disturbed about how mainly small farmers have become dependent on agrochemicals. Farming appears much easier to them today by using artificial fertilizers and hybrid seeds in short cycles. If plants have diseases, the "agro shop", which is available now in every village will provide quick help. When buying seeds the farmers receive leaflets, which describe exactly when and which fertilizers and pesticides are to be applied in order to maximize the harvest as quickly and with as little physical effort as possible.

To most farmers this sounds attractive, and we can not deny that organic farming provides a little lower harvest and implies hard physical work during the first years of cultivation. But organic farming also means to be self-determined, to be able to produce your own seeds, not to be dependent on prices of agrochemicals. And of course, it also means not poisoning the soil and yourself.

In the markets in Sri Lanka you can find vegetables that are blown from high nitrogen use in farming. They grew only half as big a few years ago. In some regions, e.g. about 70 km northeast of THE GARDEN ESTATE around the city of Anuradhapura, more than 15 percent of the population between 15 and 70 years are suffering from chronic kidney disease (CKD). Within about 20 years, more than 22,000 people have died. Several scientific studies have shown a link between contaminated drinking water through a high use of pesticides mainly on rice fields (<http://www.wsws.org/en/articles/2014/03/05/slfm-m05.html>). We hope that the newly elected president Maithripala Sirisena - unlike his corrupt predecessor - recognizes these study results and will finally regulate the use of pesticides by law.

Some people in Sri Lanka - rich, well-educated city guys, foreigners living in Sri Lanka, but also the normal rural population, for example who have cases of the disease in the family have started to think about the development of agriculture in the country. So since a few years an eco scene has slowly developed in Sri Lanka.

The view to other regions of the world shows that a small-scale, self-determined agriculture can protect against dependencies. If one considers that many poor people in Sri Lanka have to spend the bigger part of their income on food, the knowledge of self sustainable farming can create independence from market prices. If our project is successful, it could also encourage other farmers to change their farming methods.

Our goals with THE GARDEN ESTATE are:

- Create jobs to secure several families' income
- Create jobs in a healthy working environment
- spread the knowledge of organic farming methods (again)
- set an example with THE GARDEN ESTATE: "Look, it works. We can feed ourselves without agrochemicals and even make money."
- create a place of equality and integration in a country with a long civil war history: We welcome people of all ethnics, religions and genders!

We feel a personal challenge to show that ecological farming works, is profitable and can be fun. Our vision is a thriving, vibrant garden, that is home to plants and animals and in harmony with nature earns a living for the people – simply a little oasis. The first steps in this direction have already been taken.

### **Why a donation campaign for cows?**

Rathie is already there! Our first cow lives at THE GARDEN ESTATE since 2013, and had her first calf Wasana in January. We had bought Wasana's Dad as a draft animal for the plough, but the youngster was pretty wild and aggressive, so we had to give him back. The natural land with it's juicy grass is a paradise for Rathie and Wasana. But our single mum Rathie is lonely and only has a temporary shelter. Therefore we

want to bring in some cow friends and build a proper barn.

A friend of our family is giving us a bull with a cow who also had a calf end of 2014. The cow was saved from the slaughterhouse. The little cow family lives in Negombo at the moment, a town about 130 km south of THE GARDEN ESTATE on the west coast of the island. They shall find a new home with us. Including the three cows that we would like to buy on top, we would have a total of five dairy cows and when the two girlie calves are grown up there would be even seven.

For our project, cows are very valuable and provide a good basis in the long run:

- regular milk sales enable us to feed at least two families (given 5 dairy cows).
- These families can maintain the plants, grow vegetables, fruits and spices. Generating income from these products will enable us to pay more workers and more families can profit from THE GARDEN ESTATE
- Cows also help us to keep the lush sprouting grass short, which we would otherwise have to mow by hand or consume fossil fuel for a lawn mower.
- Finally, we can collect dung in the barn: cow dung is great fertilizer! At the moment we have to buy it, and we want to save these costs.

Most of the year it is dry and warm in Sri Lanka, particularly in the region around THE GARDEN ESTATE. So our cows could be outdoors throughout the year and they should be to help keeping the grass short. But during the tropical monsoons it rains very much. Then the ground soaks, and the cows need a good shelter to prevent diseases. Especially cows with young calves need a dry place then. But we also want to bring the cows into the barn at night. The reason is simple: We can collect our cow dung fertilizer much easier if the cows "unload" much of it in one place. Therefore, we plan our barn including a slurry tank. During the day, the cows are allowed to naturally ease wherever they stand and walk.

The barn should be about 80 m<sup>2</sup> and next to a small storage area (for tools, milk cans, etc.) can accommodate 10 cows. The barn is planned very open, so that no excessive heat may build up and the cows "in principle" stand outside, just having a roof over their heads and dry feet. Inside the barn there will be no separate plots, the cows are free to move. However, we are planning two small bays that can be separated, e.g. should a cow with a young calf need a protected area. Of course we will not milk the cows until their calves are strong enough to feed on grass and are no longer dependent on their mother's milk.

Apart from the concrete foundation, which we need to protect the building against termites, we will build the barn from local natural materials: wood and bamboo for the frame, clay for the half-height walls and plaited palm leaves for the roof. Although the leaves weather and need to be replaced after about 3 years. But for the time being this is the most environmental friendly and cost-effective option. Later, we might cover the roof with clay tiles instead. We would like to start the construction as soon as possible.

What we want to do now:

- buy three more cows
- build a barn
- transport the three animals from Negombo to THE GARDEN ESTATE
- buy milking equipment (milking machine with renewable energy supply, buckets, cans)

For this next step on our way to the oasis we need your help!

Be part of this great idea!

Become a part of THE GARDEN ESTATE!

If you would like to know more, please visit us in Sri Lanka, at [www.thegardenestate.com](http://www.thegardenestate.com) or email us at [thegardenestate@gmail.com](mailto:thegardenestate@gmail.com).

We are happy to tell you everything we know - about plants, animals and people on THE GARDEN ESTATE, our ideas and of course about Sri Lanka.

Further links:

first organic market in Sri Lanka: <http://www.goodmarket.lk/>

Small Organic Farmers Association: <http://www.sofasl.org/>

WOOFLK (organisation for volunteers): <http://www.wooflk.org/>

article about kidney diseases: <http://www.wsws.org/en/articles/2014/03/05/slfm-m05.html>

permaculture: <http://permacultureprinciples.com/> und <http://www.permaculture.org/>