Gérard & the development of AuroOrchard

We are privileged that Gérard has agreed to share some memories of his very special journey developing AuroOrchard at the request of The Mother. AuroOrchard is Auroville’s oldest and second-biggest farm, and he has maintained it for over 50 years.

‘An extraordinary experience’

Gérard, born in Geneva (Switzerland), came to the Sri Aurobindo Ashram in 1955, at the young age of 23. “My first work was at the Bakery (where work starts at 4 am daily)**, he recalls, “and as a coach and maintenance man at the New Swimming Pool. From 1959, The Mother gave me the opportunity to live and work in Mountain Paradise in the Himalayas near Nainital - Almora (Uttarakhand)”**, where the Ashram has an ‘orchard-farm’ growing apples and peaches.

He fondly remembers sending a lot of crates of apples to Pondicherry, which were greatly appreciated by the Mother, and the fruits were distributed to the Ashramites. “It looks like it was my apprenticeship in horticulture!” he muses.

Asked about his most special memories of his 60 years at the Ashram and Auroville, where he has been looking after AuroOrchard since its very beginning, Gérard shares:
“At the time, I had been coming to the Ashram from mid-December to the end of February for the last few years. Mother suggested that I could ‘help’ Roger Anger to rebuild, to improve Promesse - to make it ‘livable’. One day in 1967, She called me and said: ‘Do you know, I have a piece of land near Promesse, and it would be good if you could go to see how it could be developed.’ So I went to see it and gave Her a short report.

When I saw Mother the next time, She asked me: ‘Would you be ready to take care of this piece of land and try to grow vegetables and fruit for Auroville?’ I was quite surprised, but told her, ‘Why not – if you say so, I am ready.’

It was not to be immediately, and I had to go back to Mountain Paradise; this was shortly after Auroville’s inauguration. In fact, farming at Mountain Paradise was my preparation for AuroOrchard. But the following year Mother said to me with a smile: ‘I have a surprise for you. If you are ready to take charge of AuroOrchard, it will be very nice.’

I asked Her: ‘But Mother, what will happen to Mountain Paradise?’ ‘Don’t worry’, She told me, ‘I have already found someone to look after it.’ ‘Mother, it is fine - if it is Your will, I am willing.’ . . . She smiled and said: ‘It will be a very interesting experience for you.’ And so, towards the end of 1968, I came back from the Himalayas and started to take care of AuroOrchard, keeping it going and gradually developing it.”
Ganesh temple has always been part of AuroOrchard. The Mother had accepted to buy the farm along with the condition that the temple would be maintained and a puja would be held every day in Ganapati’s honour.

The pujas at Ganesh Temple have continued uninterrupted and still go on today. Bithi is currently in charge of the temple, which is looked after daily by Diwakar, a long-term French Aurovilian who performs the puja there every morning. Once a year, on Ganesh Puja in September, all of Auroville is invited for the special puja in honour of Ganapathi with many children coming and kirtans are sung.

Gérard concludes this sharing with these memorable words:

“Half a century has passed since that beginning, and always my heart remains filled with gratitude for this ‘exceptional experience’ that She had offered me and guided me through.”
Editor’s note

We sincerely thank Gérard for the privilege of this memoir that he especially consented to share as a support for the Acres for Auroville land campaign, and we thank Jasmin for recording and compiling Gérard’s words.

(Photo of Gérard by Mani of Foodlink)
Today, AuroOrchard has 45 acres (18 hectares) that are all fully organic. As Auroville’s second largest farm, it supplies a very wide variety of food for Auroville’s essential daily needs:

- fruit (papaya, lime, avocado, jackfruit, pomelo, lemons, pineapple, passion fruit, guava, ramphal, sitaphal (custard apple); Coconuts and ground nuts, with large mango and cashew orchards.
- vegetables (long beans, bottle gourd, brinjal, cucumbers, varieties of spinach, ladies’s fingers, pumpkins, sweet potatoes, sweet corn, drumstick, taro, tapioca, yam, elephant foot, jicama, salads, rucola, radish);
- Medicinal herbs and teas (lemongrass, tulsi, rosella); loofa sponges; grass for making brooms
- Eggs and milk

Here are more photos of AuroOrchards beginnings and how it is today!

THE BEGINNINGS:
AND NOW: