Aurogreen is one of Auroville’s inspiring success stories. Covering about 25 acres in the northeast part of the Greenbelt, it is one of the Auroville’s oldest farms and holds the honor of being the first to be organic. It was started in 1975 by Charlie and today is managed by Charlie along with Shanmugam. In these conversations with Auroville pioneer and neighbor, Suzie, we get a glimpse into the immense challenges of these early days - planting, eating, water, survival - and the ingenuity it took to succeed. We are grateful to Charlie for sharing the adventure of Aurogreen’s step-by-step growth and his 47 years of intensive work for Auroville.

Charlie, a young American, arrived in Auroville on the last day of 1970 after living in Jaipur, Rajasthan with family friends. His Indian stepmother had known the family of Kireet Joshi from her early years in India. It was through the visits of Kireet’s brother Prabodh to his family home in the USA that Charlie had come to know of Auroville.

In 1974 Charlie was living at Success doing land work: bunding, planting trees and keeping them alive. His first vegetable garden was there where he experimented with a few rain-fed crops like ulundu (dal), cambu (millet) and peanuts. Because there were lots of palmyras, it was decided to prepare palm jaggery (brown sugar).
A special team of tappers was hired to prepare the trees over a period of several months. Cutting off the stems of the flowers stopped the flowering and caused a juice to seep out that can be collected and fermented as alcohol (toddy) or processed into jaggery. At the appropriate time the sap was collected and boiled down in large clay pots. When it thickened, lime was added to stop the fermentation process. It was then poured into depressions that had been made in the red earth. Each depression was lined with a leaf cup. When the liquid mixture hardened it could be separated from the leaf wrappings and stored. The jaggery was grown in Forecomers and sold to other Aurovilians to help support the Forecomers community. In addition to the lumps of jaggery used as sweetener in tea and cakes, the residents of Forecomers made fudge using jaggery and chocolate. This was a very popular luxury item at the time, selling for a hefty 75p. a piece!

At a certain point Charlie had the aspiration to start a large organic farm for Auroville. At that time AuroOrchard was not fully organic. There were only a couple of hundred people in Auroville then and everyone encouraged him to go ahead. In 1974 no one was very clear then about which fields belonged to whom. In fact Forecomers residents grew crops on fields that belonged to villagers. The idea was to find a 50 acre piece of land.

Newlands was at first considered, but it was only 10 acres and therefore too small. Also, it was not possible to purchase land in that area at a reasonable rate. The town planners offered Center Field on the condition that when the city grew the farm would have to move. To Charlie it didn’t seem wise to invest all that energy into a farm that would be later overtaken by urban development, so he searched for outlying land.
At that time, the Sri Aurobindo Society had landbrokers who helped buy land for Auroville. It was these brokers located some plots near several existing pieces of Auroville land on the northeast edge of the Greenbelt near a community that Rose and Boris had started in 1974. Rose and Boris had built a hut and planted a small mango orchard. Although they made three attempts at digging a well, they failed to secure a well good enough for agriculture. Then Jurgen began to help with the work. Charlie approached them offering to secure additional land of 30 acres and to dig a deep well. They agreed to join forces. Once the land was secured in January 1975 Shamsundar proposed the name Aurogreen.

**Laying out the roads, bunds, and hedges**

Nothing but sandy fields and palmyras greeted the eye when Charlie stepped onto the land that was to become Aurogreen Farm. The first task in giving shape to the farm was to lay out the roads.

After consulting with experienced agriculturalists at AuroOrchard and Aurobrindavan, it was decided to use a grid pattern of roads and fields so that later on it would be relatively easy to install sprinkler irrigation. An International Harvester tractor was purchased with project money. This was used to level the land, to build bunds and to carve the trenches that were later filled with 50,000 Acacia farnesiana - “Supramental knowledge” - hedge plants.

At that time there were no JCB extractors and almost all land contour work was done with manual labor. Govindaswamy had a big contract team of around one hundred men. For the work at Aurogreen they were hired as day laborers at Rs.5/day. During the course of the work that day wage was increased to Rs.7/day. It took months to complete the work.
Once the land work was over, the hedge plants that had been grown in the nursery at Success were planted. At that stage there was still no well and hence no way to water the young seedlings. Charlie and Jurgen spent their days driving the tractor and trailer back and forth to Matrimandir where they filled barrels with water and returned to Aurogreen. This went on for two years.

The Big Well

In order to do serious agriculture for Auroville it was understood that a lot of water was needed. The decision was taken to drill a deep well. At that time there were only 2 or 3 rigs in all of India that were capable of going as deep as 300 meters. They were all under the umbrella of the Central Government Hydrological Survey. That agency was already in the process of doing its own hydrological research on the sub-continent. In South India they had decided to dig several deep test wells a certain distance apart: in Kalapet, Aurogreen, near JIPMER and by the Lake Estate. In each location there were to be three wells. The first was to be an observation well. Here in Aurogreen, this well was drilled to 390 meters with slots at 220-280 meters. The casing went down to 390 meters and all the aquifers above were sealed off so they could collect data on the 3rd aquifer alone. Bentonite (a type of very fine clay) was used as a sealant to prevent water from other aquifers from flowing into the well. The second well was drilled down to the bedrock granite basement at 500 meters with all the aquifers above sealed as in the observation well and the third well was to be like the second, but with all aquifers above left open.

To dig these wells the Hydrological Survey, whose management was based in Bangalore, sent a crew of 60 men to camp out in tents on the site. They worked in shifts of 20 men at a time and by that means kept the rig working 24 hours a day. The water in the observation well was found to be potable and also fit for agricultural use, though it released sulphur gas which gave off a rotten egg smell.
From the observation well there was a yield of 80,000 liters/hour and the second well yielded up to nearly 2,00,000 l/h but it was not fit for drinking and could only be used for agriculture. The project for drilling the third well was abandoned once it was determined that the water in the deepest aquifer, the one below 400 meters, was unsuitable for use. As the water in the deep aquifer proved unusable the government wanted to remove the casing from both of the drilled wells. However, it was finally agreed that Aurogreen could purchase the second well which did not have potable water.

Charlie wanted to keep the observation well. In response the government said they could not sell an observation well, that only the main well could be purchased. As it was not agreed to purchase that well, they made plans to remove the casing. So Aurovilians stopped that work and there was a stalemate for some months. (The drilling crew remained in place for months and of course had to be paid.) Finally it was agreed that Auroville could buy both wells—but there was not enough money for that.

Months later, the Governor of Pondy called Charlie into Pondy for a reckoning. He asked if Charlie had not signed a paper agreeing to buy both the wells. Charlie replied that he didn’t recall signing such an agreement. Next the Governor reached into a drawer, pulled out a paper and asked Charlie if the signature on it was his. He admitted that it was and said that under stress he must have put his signature to the paper.

He then explained the on-the-ground situation at that moment: that all the money had been spent on bunding, planting, setting up the rest of the infrastructure that would be needed to start a large organic farm and that he had not put aside funds for two very costly wells, one of which was useless. Luckily the Governor understood and let him go.
In the next chapter of this saga, Chamanlal of the Sri Aurobindo Ashram played a prominent role. As he was about to board a domestic Indian flight, he noticed that the Chairman of the South Indian Hydrological Board was on the same flight. Although Chamanlal did not personally know the Chairman, they were both members of the Indian scientific community at that time and were aware of each other’s work. He arranged to be seated beside the Chairman and was able to explain the whole story.

Later that Chairman issued orders that further studies on the Aurogreen well would need to be done. He arranged that the casing was left in the two wells and sent the crew and equipment away. Once the crew had left, the casing was sawed off the observation well and the water began to be used for the farm. Years later the Central Government, with the help of their accountants, shifted the costs of the project elsewhere in order to clear their books and the matter was officially considered closed. Once the well was opened, its water was used not only for agriculture. Almost daily, bullock carts from the neighboring Greenbelt communities equipped with barrels or tanks came and lined up at the well. Thus, with the help of this well, hundreds of new saplings in the nearby forests were established.

**The first house at Aurogreen**

Although the land for Aurogreen was purchased in January of 1975, it was not until November of that year that Charlie finally settled in the Fertile area. He stayed in the pump house at Fertile East for some months and also over at Fertile in a small hut while his house was being built. From the beginning Charlie had the intention that his house would also serve as a collective space.
Thus that house was much more spacious than other houses constructed at the time. For twenty years the community kitchen for up to twelve community members was in that house.

Johnny (Fertile) and Charlie worked out the floor plan together. Then Ramu and his kheet team were called and Johnny directed the erection of the wood roof frame. The first covering on the roof was kheet; a short time later thatch was added on top of that. A team of carpenters (including Kumaraswamy who later had a carpentry workshop in our area) made not only the structure for the roof, but also doors, windows, tables, etc. At that time what was called “fresh” Indian wood was plentiful. And the prices were low: pillai madu and venteak Rs. 32/cubic foot. and yellow teak for Rs. 90/cubic foot. Mango wood at Rs.14/cubic foot was used for the floor of the upper room. A mason and his helper did the brick work and laid down the black cement floor of the “big” room.

Finally, in November 1975, Charlie moved in - and began the real work of growing food for Auroville!

Conversations by Charlie shared with Suzie,
Auroville, January 2022

And since those early days ....
Charlie has been developing and tending Aurogreen as a labor of love and joy for 47 years.

Today Aurogreen covers about 25 acres of which 1.5 acres are being cultivated with irrigation. Thanks to its well, the farm grows a variety of crops on irrigated land, papaya, limes, lemons, oranges and pommelos plus tomatoes, brinjals, long beans, lettuce, basil and other aromatic plants. It also grows cow fodder for its growing dairy.

Aurogreen also has large orchards of non-irrigated produce: cashews, jackfruit, chikkoo, mangoes and tamarind under dry land conditions.

There is forest land, with timber trees inter-planted around the farm and in a number of separate plots.

The farm has a 5 hp solar pump for the main well, that can also run on grid electricity, and has set up two solar panel booster pump sets for drip and micro sprinkler systems on the irrigated plots.

Aurogreen has a small but growing dairy of 5 animals. The dairy products, milk and varieties of cheese (fresh, middle-aged and grated Parmesan-style cheese) are supplied to Foodlink and Pour Tous to be served to Auroville community. Some of the milk is sold to Greenbelt residents in its immediate surroundings.

Eleven years ago, Aurovilian Shanmugam, with his wife Magesh, and their two children, Maya (6) and Kavimaha (3) joined Charlie in the farm work and the adventure.
Charlie, with his pioneering vision, ingenuity, steadfastness, and intensive work has made extraordinary contributions to Auroville. His house stands in all its beauty, the fields continue to yield, the water flows from the well, and life continues in Aurogreen for the coming generations.