

GOA, MONDAY, MAY 26, 2025

# A blooming obsession: Serena Dias and her global garden in Nuvem

ANISHA FRANCIS  
anisha@herald-go.com

**MARGAO:** When Serena Dias unzips her suitcase after a trip, it's rarely clothes that tumble out — it's leaves, stems, and the scent of soil. On holiday, she's a woman on a mission — to find and bring back as many exotic plants as she can fit in her luggage.

"Most of my travel plans are made based on what new kinds of native plants I may find at my destination," says Serena, a retired school principal, unapologetic about her obsession with gardening.

"Yes, I'm a crazy plant lady. I've been this way for as long as I can remember, but only now do I have the time to let it grow wild," she quips, as she deftly removes a dead leaf from her spider orchid (*Brassia giroudiana*), currently blooming with a large, wonderfully leggy flower.

"I spend most of my day tending to my garden, and when I'm back



indoors, I'm either thinking about my plants, talking about them, or educating myself about their care," she says, as her husband, Freddie Dias, smiles in agreement.

The couple's home in Nuvem is an amateur observatory of sorts, brimming with hundreds of varieties of rare and beautiful plants collected over years. Every inch of the compound that surrounds the house is used efficiently, designed with the needs of each plant in mind. Their car is parked on the street, as the garage has also been claimed by the garden.

Sunshine-loving plants like bougainvillea and adeniums (desert roses) stand proudly on the compound wall, their fuchsia

flowers in full bloom.

"When the rains begin, I move them under the shed, as they don't do well with too much water," she explains.

The orchids — over 75 distinct varieties — hang in special baskets, carefully sheltered from direct sunlight. Reedy water plants are grouped together, while crotons and harder local plants thrive in the small rock garden.

Tiny containers and terrariums of succulents cover every windowsill — but those are only the ones that cannot be accommodated in the makeshift 'greenhouse' Serena and Freddie have built for them, to give them the best chance of surviving the Goan humidity.

"Succulents are notoriously difficult to grow here because they require cooler, drier weather. We have to be so careful not to overwater them, as their plump leaves rot quickly," Serena sighs, as she fusses over the knobby little plants neatly arranged on shelves inside the warm enclosure, where bulbous



cacti flaunt strange, colourful flowers.

Serena's pride and joy, however, is her Hoya collection — rare vines with waxy, star-shaped blooms that seem too perfect to be real. "They aren't easy to grow, but luckily, mine are thriving," she says.

Native to Indonesia, the Hoyas occupy premium real estate in the garden, hanging closest to the front door. Nearly all plants are neatly labelled with their common and Latin names, many of which sound more like magical spells than plant varieties.

Ironically, Serena was a zoology teacher, who inculcated a love for gardening in her students. "We grew potted plants all over the school, and I was very strict in ensuring the students cared for them properly. Even today, I call and ask about them," she laughs.

As you go deeper into this bo-

tanical paradise, Freddie's touches become apparent — a wooden wheelbarrow and model well, a whimsical little bridge over a water channel, a rocky pond full of aquatic plants, logs and tree trunks fashioned into tables, shelves and receptacles to hold plants — all built from scratch by engineer Freddie, who retired as principal of Fr Agnel Polytechnic in Verna.

Happily indulgent of his wife's hobby, Freddie helps her enthusiastically — be it with the logistics of hanging and displaying the thousands of plants they have, or with building and heavy lifting, or joining her on her quest to hunt down horticulture societies and plant nurseries whenever they go on holiday.

"Well, I love my wife, and my wife loves plants — so I automatically love plants," he says with a smile.

He has only one rule — no plants inside the house — which Serena agrees with too, as she doesn't fancy mud and bugs indoors. "In the garden, I use mostly natural ingredients to deter insects and pests —

powdered cinnamon works great" she says.

While each species of flora requires different nutrients, Serena swears by organic fertilisers like vermicompost, bone meal, seaweed, and the ubiquitous Jeeva Amruth — a concoction of cow dung and urine, gram flour, jaggery and ghee. Other supplies, including special soil for succulents and cinder for the orchids, are couriered in from her favourite nurseries in Himachal Pradesh and Meghalaya.

It is an expensive hobby, the couple admits, but one they thoroughly enjoy. "Our children are settled abroad, but I'm thrilled that my grandchildren have taken to plants too. Maybe one of them will inherit my green thumb," she says, smiling. Serena is known for gifting plants but never selling them. "I just want young people to discover how joyful it is to watch something grow. If someone's willing to learn, I'm always happy to teach."



## A JOURNEY INTO THE HEART OF GOA

In our continuous efforts to put people at the centre of our journalism, we bring to you a weekly collection of stories, specially curated from our ground-level reportage which celebrates the joys, and shares the sorrows of people in their grassroots. These are, at heart, very simple stories, simply told. Interesting initiatives, out-of-the-box thinking, dogged persistence on any issue, and the struggles of people over the years as they try and put their disrupted lives back together are not just news stories.

Each is a document from the wards and vaddos of Goa, a postcard, a letter, a share. This collection is brought to you from O Heraldo's team of reporters who have been given one simple mandate — go out, travel, and speak to people about their lives.

From Wards and Vaddos is as much your project as O Heraldo's and we welcome all of you on this journey into the heart of Goa. Please email editor@herald-go.com or reach us on Twitter, Facebook, and Instagram.

## Young goatherd Sagar Jankar builds a life off the beaten path

Sagar collects around five litres of milk a day, all of which he distributes to the needy. His income mainly comes from the sale of goats and their dung, a valuable fertiliser

ERWIN FONSECA

**ASSAGAO:** "No one is born great, but it is small people who do small things in a great way, think great, and become great. Great thoughts translated into great actions make a person great."

These are the words that 21-year-old Sagar Jankar from Torxem village in Pernem lives by. While many youths today choose the comfort of conventional jobs, Sagar has chosen a path rarely walked — that of a full-time goatherd and entrepreneur. For him, life is about thinking out of the box and creating a model others might follow.

Coming from a humble background and a village on the Goa-Maharashtra border, Sagar's journey began not with a business plan, but with a gift from his grandfather — a single goat. "I was still in school when my grandfather gave me a small goat and told me to look after it," says Sagar. "At first, I treated it like a pet, like you would a dog. I'd take it for walks and developed an instant bond with it. At the time, I wasn't even thinking about making a career out of it. I just wanted to finish school."

And he did. Sagar completed his SSC and went on to pursue an ITI course to become an electrician. But his heart lay elsewhere. "As soon as I finished my education, I told myself — this is my future."

Today, Sagar owns and cares for a thriving herd of around 70 goats — 20 adults and 50 young ones. "To anyone else, they



Goat's milk is highly medicinal and very rare. I give it free to people who need it. Most of them are unwell. I don't want money from them — I want their blessings. I want to be a role model for others. I want to be known not just for my goats, but for the way I run this business. Reputation matters — Sagar Jankar

may just be goats. But to me, they're family," he says. "I am the head of this family, and I take full responsibility for their wellbeing."

Sagar leads a quiet, self-sufficient life. With no interest in government jobs or white-collar work, he avoids political patronage and paperwork. "I don't have time for that. My goats are my priority," he says.

Each day, rain or shine, Sagar can be seen taking his herd to graze in open fields around Pernem — an area still relatively untouched by rampant construction. He is well-known in the area, with the large size of his herd making his presence unmistakable.

Despite being just 21, Sagar already practises a form of grassroots

philanthropy. "Goat's milk is highly medicinal and very rare. I give it free to people who need it. Most of them are unwell. I don't want money from them — I want their blessings." Sagar currently gets around five litres of milk a day, all of which he distributes to the needy. His income mainly comes from the sale of goats and their dung, which is a valuable organic fertiliser.

"From just one goat ten years ago, I've created an empire," he says with pride. "I'm determined to succeed in goat-rearing."

He cautions that the profession isn't as simple as it seems. "You need an initial investment — say, about Rs 1 lakh — and with the right planning, you could earn up to Rs 9 lakh every year or every alternate year."

"But you must have at least 50 goats if you want to sell regularly. I sell only about ten goats every two or three years, depending on the herd's size. That way, I don't feel the loss, because the younger ones grow up in the meantime."

Sagar has sold around 30 goats since he fully immersed himself in the profession. While many of his peers see such work as menial, he believes it is a high-paying, rewarding job — emotionally and financially.

"There's also a bond you form with the animals. When I call out, all the goats gather around me — no matter where they are." He adds, "Nothing comes easy. Hard work is always there. But so are the rewards. I'm very particular about their feed. I only let them graze on clean grass. That's what keeps them healthy, and that's what fetches a better price."

Looking ahead, Sagar dreams big. "I want to be a role model for others. I want to be known not just for my goats, but for the way I run this business. Reputation matters."

## FATES TIED TO THE SOIL: Hanuman Vaigankar has farmed his land for half a century

JENIFER FERNANDES  
joseph@herald-go.com

**ALDONA:** At 71, Hanuman Vaigankar of Nachinola continues to live the life of a proud Goan farmer, working tirelessly in the fields of neighbouring Aldona where he has cultivated indigenous crops for over five decades.

"My parents were farmers for nearly 60 years, and I've simply followed in their footsteps," he says with quiet pride. "It's our traditional business, and I will continue doing it for as long as my body allows."

During the monsoon season, Hanuman grows paddy. In the dry months, he cultivates a variety of vegetables including chillies, red amaranth, radish, long beans, and lady's fingers (bhindi), which he sells directly at the local market. What sets his produce apart is its purity — grown without any chemical fertilisers, using only natural methods passed down through generations.

"All my vegetables are ganvtti — natural and organic. They may not look as fresh as the chemically sprayed ones, but they are far better for health," he explains. "People fall sick with skin infections and even cancer from eating chemically treated food, but realise the value of organic produce only when it's too late."

Despite the increasing challenges of farming, Hanuman remains committed to his work. He recalls the paddy season with both fondness and frustration. "We prepare the fields and pray for rain. But now the weather is unpredictable. Last year, I spent Rs 10,000 to Rs 15,000 preparing my field. It stayed flooded for a month. I couldn't grow anything — total loss," he says. "We farmers can't control nature. Everything is in God's hands."

Farming, he insists, is anything but easy. "People see us sitting in the market and think it's an easy job. They



During the monsoon season, Hanuman grows paddy. In the dry months, he cultivates a variety of vegetables including chillies, red amaranth, radish, long beans, and lady's fingers (bhindi), which he sells directly at the local market. What sets his produce apart is its purity — grown without any chemical fertilisers, using only natural methods passed down through generations

didn't favour people like us, despite our hard work."

Now, his days start early. "I wake at 5 a.m., say my prayers, have tea, and head to the fields. Later, I go to the market to sell vegetables. The money I earn is just enough to get by."

Hanuman is quick to point out the rising costs and hardships farmers face today. "Life is getting more expensive. Even fruits are laced with chemicals. My vegetables may spoil in a day — that's how you know they're real. Chemically treated vegetables last eight days, but they aren't safe."

Over the years, he has seen prices rise. "What costs

The younger generation rarely chooses this path anymore. They've seen how difficult it is — working in the sun, wading through muddy water. They are educated and have different ambitions. In our time, we had no options. We worked to survive — Hanuman Vaigankar

Rs 50 today used to cost Rs 10 only a few years ago," he says. "I've worked hard to educate my children and build a better life for them. I even worked in wells and did white-washing jobs at churches. That's how I bought land and built a house."

Though age has slowed him down, he continues farming with the help of modern tools. "Earlier, I used traditional methods to water the crops.

Now, I have a pump which makes it easier. Still, the work is hard."

And yet, Hanuman remains deeply content. "Farming may not bring luxury," he says, "but it brings peace, purpose, and pride."

