

## Doon Watch Nature Series for Dehradun Live Hindustan Times by Sanjay Sondhi

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Lantana-the plant I love to hate!

I don't like it, I muttered. But its just a plant, said Anchal, my wife. But I don't like it, I grumbled again. Dad, you've not written about a plant for ages, exclaimed my son, Yash. Giving both of them a piqued look, I turned my attention to the point of discussion. Everyone is allowed to have their likes and dislikes, and I had my share. Top of my list, as far as nature was concerned, was the Lantana plant.

This ubiquitous shrub, is a an exotic plant, being a native of the tropical regions of Africa and the Americas. Introduced into India and now naturalized, it has spread rapidly, throughout the country. Lantana (*Lantana camara*) is a shrub or bush that can grow up to 6 feet in height. The shrub rapidly colonizes degraded areas smothering out the growth of any other plants in its vicinity. Its cluster of flowers are deceptively pretty, being either orange or pink with yellow centers and are often visited by nectar-seeking butterflies and moths. The stems of the shrub have many downward facing thorns. A close encounter with the shrub leaves you with painfull scratches and lacerations. Its leaves are rough, and feel like sandpaper. If you crush the leaves between your fingers, a powerful pungent odour-and I don't like the smell.



Just the other day, I walked along a jungle path near Danda Lokand, a village near

Dhoran Khas on Sahastradhara road. On my previous visit to the area, the path was a few feet wide, winding its way into a pretty grove of trees. Now, Lantana had flourished, and the entire path was covered with this noxious weed. In a few places, the Lantana thickets had an inviting opening; a tunnel-like opening existing through the bushes. But as soon as I entered the opening, and walked a few meters, the tunnel narrowed and eventually closed in on me. All my efforts to walk through the thickets left me scratched and bruised. As I said-I despise the plant!

These days, the Lantana bushes are fruiting. The cluster of Lantana berries, green when raw, turn black when ripe, and are relished by many fruit-eating birds. They are a real favourite with the Red-vented and Himalayan bulbuls. These birds eat the fruit, and help their seeds to disperse, thereby inadvertently, causing the weed to spread extensively.



Other birds such as the White-tailed rubythroat, the Bluethroat and many prinias use the Lantana for cover, as they hunt for insects on paths beside the thickets. Often, the mongoose uses the thickets as protection, and slips it way into the undergrowth on spotting humans.

Lantana has few natural enemies. It is not grazed on by cattle, though it is used for

firewood. A parasitic climber called the Akaash bel, often climbs onto the Lantana shrub, and smothers the Lantana, restricting its growth. Yes!!!

For all my dislike of the Lantana plant-it does have some uses. People have started using the stems of Lantana to make wicker chairs and tables. So all the people out there, please indulge the author, and start using chairs and tables made from Lantana, thereby reducing the spread of this weed!

Sanjay Sondhi is a Dehradun based naturalist. Feedback on this column is welcome at [doonwatch@gmail.com](mailto:doonwatch@gmail.com)

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Making a difference: Help reduce the spread of Lantana. For buying furniture made from Lantana, contact Gram Vikas Vibhag, Dehradun, 0135-2712001, 2714118.