

the connector

HOW HER garden grows

Saima Abassi is as surprised as anyone that a childhood love of nature has blossomed into a passion for the environment that has her working with local organizations here and in her native Pakistan to create sustainable natural habitats.

Walking through Saima Abassi's garden gate was like entering another world. It was the first really hot day of summer, after weeks of rain and definitely not summer-like temperatures. The first time we'd met was at the Chicago Botanic Gardens in late April, when the air was crisp and cool, and not much was blooming. It was different today, as Saima's garden burst with life — plants, flowers, bees and butterflies — that greeted the heat and sun as if they'd been waiting for it.

We met in her backyard, where her garden takes up approximately 20 square feet. Enclosed by a wooden fence trimmed with chicken wire to keep rabbits and other hungry pests at bay, the four rectangular raised planting beds hold herbs, salad greens, tomatoes and squash, sorrel, and chives topped with purple thistle-like flowers. Tomato stakes are inverted in the ground, creating trellises for plants to climb; at the entrance, a gate overhung with trumpet vine stood open, a small bell topped by a rooster attached at the side to announce your entrance, if you so desired.

The effect was charming, even more so after spending time with Saima, a self-described naturalist whose work in the two places she calls home — Lahore, Pakistan, where she grew up, and Wilmette, Ill., where she and her husband raised their children after moving to the United States — demonstrates the power that community can have on creating environmental awareness.



Saima Abassi enters her charming backyard garden, eager to inspect the day's harvest.



Scenes from a garden.

“Where you live is the first place you have to put your energies,” Saima says, when asked about her grassroots efforts. “I love nature, I like connecting people to nature, and I realized quickly that I’m not the only one interested in these things.”

Gardens are a theme in Saima Abasi’s life, where they serve as a source of inspiration for her evolution as what she calls an “environmentally conscious person.”

Growing up in Lahore, Saima connected to nature through her father, who regularly took his family to spend time at their farm in the foothills of the Hindu Kush mountains, in northern Pakistan. There, they watched sheep and goats, hiked the trails, saw lush vegetation and crops, and immersed themselves in an environment very different from their everyday urban surroundings.

In 1989 Saima and her husband moved to Chicago — in January, no less, with snow on the ground.

“It was so, so cold,” she laughs. “I didn’t grow up with snow, and it looked so amazing. I loved it.”

They set down roots in Wilmette, in the city’s northern suburbs, and began raising their three children. In 2006 the family returned to Lahore for four years, after which they moved back to Wilmette. It was during that time in Pakistan that Saima recognized her growing environmental sensibility.

“The Lahore I left in 1989 was rapidly changing,” she says. “I grew up with an awareness of not wasting things, which I didn’t see as much in the States. But this time in Lahore, I didn’t see a lot of environmental concern. There was so much pollution in the air you could see it, and I thought, this is terrible.”

Back in Wilmette, Saima volunteered as the PTA’s recycling point person at her children’s elementary school but she credits the first lighting bolt moment that changed how she thought about nature to a morning in 2013, when she visited a friend.



“We were having tea in her kitchen, which overlooked her backyard,” Saima says. “She had a vegetable garden that was surrounded by twig fencing she’d made herself, and it looked just like a fairy garden. I was so inspired.”

Having never gardened growing up, nor having had any interest in doing so, Saima surprised herself when she asked her friend for a tour. They went outside, and her friend told her about the vegetables she was growing, and the process of composting. Saima went home and started researching on her own, learning about sustainability, biodiversity and environmental groups in town, notably Go Green Wilmette, a

local organization started in 2006. (*For more on Go Green Wilmette, see page 13.*)

“Right away, I felt a total sense of connection,” she says of the group, which she praises for bringing together like-minded citizens with an interest in the environment. Saima joined the organization in 2013 and the board soon after, helping to create programming and other initiatives.

“It’s so good to see people trying to make a difference in earnest every day,” Saima says. “With this group, I feel like I’m never alone. We’re all invested in the same thing.”

With her feet planted firmly in the local environmental community, Saima’s efforts to educate others began to grow.

“Oh my goodness, it’s a blue heron!”

We’re sitting on the deck of the cafe at the Chicago Botanic Garden, talking about gardening. Saima’s enthusiastic about what she’s learned and very quick to credit others’ work more than her own, but it’s hard for her to finish a thought before she gets distracted, pointing to a lush clump of prairie grass, or a giant blue



The pond at the Chicago Botanic Garden.

heron taking flight from the nearby pond.

Her enthusiasm is contagious, and we stop our conversation to watch the bird spread its wings, flapping slowly to gain momentum as it glides low along the surface of the water. She returns to the topic at hand: the sustainable yard tours she helps to organize for Go Green Wilmette.

The idea came to her in 2013 after that first visit to her friend’s vegetable garden. Saima thought two things after leaving the house that morning: one, that if she’s interested in gardening, then most likely other people would be too; and two, that showing people how their neighbors garden might inspire them to try it as well.

“When someone has a private garden in your town, that makes it doable,” Saima says. “People start to think, maybe I can start something too.”

In its first year (2013), the sustainable yard tour visited six gardens that were chosen to present a variety of designs and components: native plants and pollinator habitats; rain and stormwater management; composting; and edibles. The hosts gave presentations

about their garden, from design to sharing tips and techniques.

“Every yard host was so generous,” Saima says. “They were so excited that so many people are interested in what they were doing.”

The tour was a hit. In all, Go Green Wilmette has featured 37 gardens and attracted 800 visitors. In 2018 alone, more than 300 people took part, with the tour lasting far longer than the two hours allotted. This year, they feature eight gardens on a longer tour.

It’s the passion of everyone involved that Saima admires.

“A garden is a canvas and it’s the gardeners’ choice how they paint it,” she says. “Their garden creates a unique piece of art, and like all creations, they’re never done with it.”

It was a Facebook post about another friend’s backyard that led to Saima’s next big idea.

“One morning a friend posted about a fragrant tree in her backyard, and asked if anyone knew what it was,” she says. “The tree was linden, which infuses the neighborhood with a sweet, beautiful fragrance. So many people commented on it that I thought if people are interested in this, why not do something for them?”

Her idea: a tree walk, modeled after the successful sustainable yard tours.

Since she knew little about trees, Saima set to work learning as much as she could to lead the first tour in 2013.

“I took a tree-helpers course for open lands. I bought books. I recruited people to help, and it was as if the universe was helping me. In our first year, more than 70 people showed up. We were so surprised.”

Like the yard tour, interest in the tree walk continues to grow. In 2018, more than 100 people showed up to hear Lydia Scott, the director of the Chicago Region Trees Initiative at the Morton Arboretum, lead the walk. Enlisting the participation and support of experts like Scott is one of Go Green Wilmette’s strategies to build awareness beyond the local area.

“We want every community to have their own sustainable yard and tree walks,” Saima says.



More than 100 people attended Go Green Wilmette’s 2018 Tree Walk, just one of the projects it sponsors that brings people closer to nature.

A 2016 newspaper headline about air pollution in her hometown of Lahore inspired Saima yet again, this time to model the success of Go Green groups in Wilmette and other areas to establish a similar effort there.

The group, Go Green Lahore (GGL), is a grassroots community organization whose mission is to raise environmental awareness, specifically to reduce air pollution by planting trees. The initiative is three-fold: reduce air pollution by reducing the use of plastic bags, which people burn along with trash; focus on education, with group members giving talks to school children and other interested groups about sustainability and planting native trees; and action. This last goal is where Saima sees the most results, with small steps already leading to change.

“Big goals make people disheartened and paralyzed,” she explains. “Baby steps are achievable.”

Case in point: reusable tote bags. Go Green Lahore had canvas tote bags made for volunteers to give out to school groups, at shops and at local community events to encourage people to ditch plastic bags for reusable ones. They sought out local community groups to talk to about native trees, and Saima herself has given presentations



Tote bags designed by GGL to reduce the use of plastics.

when she returns to visit family.

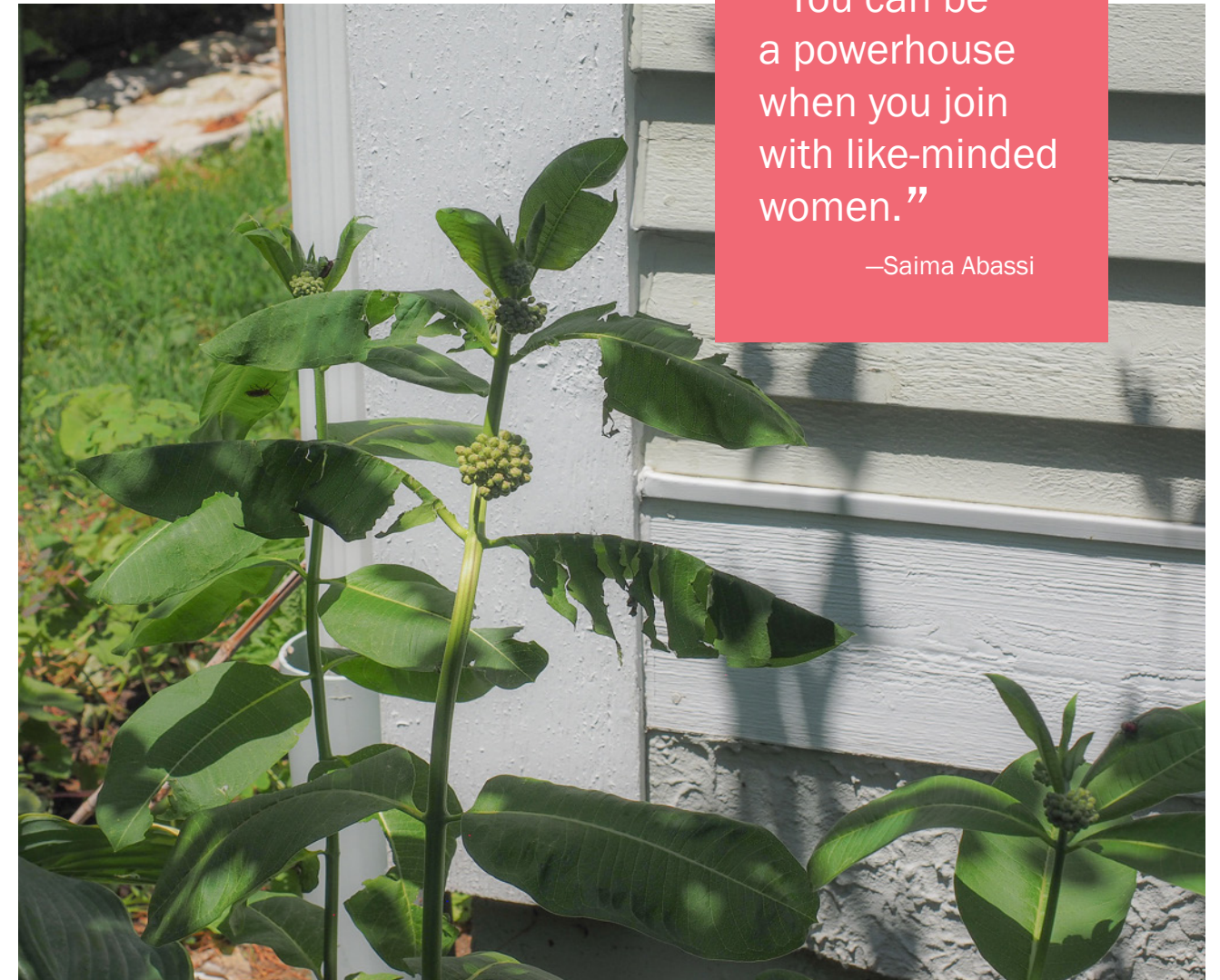
The GGL board, which now consist of 14 members, recently announced a corporate sponsorship that will enable GGL to establish a small tree plantation outside Lahore, and fund it for three years. And with the Pakistan government’s recent initiative to plant 1 billion trees in Lahore, GGL is in the process of registering with the Pakistan government as a non-governmental organization in order to participate.

It’s a lot of progress in a not very long period of time, and Saima couldn’t be happier with the direction GGL is taking.

“When women with skills get so invested in a cause, there’s no reason they can’t be successful,” she says.

On a personal level, the connection to Go Green Lahore has brought Saima even closer with her sister Zara, who is actively involved with GGL.

“She found my passion and now it’s hers as well,” Saima says. “She’s getting her master’s degree in environmental science, and that makes me very happy. To be connected to my sister on that level, that’s very big for me personally.”



Milkweed, a plant native to Illinois, is easy to plant and attracts Monarch butterflies.

“You can be a powerhouse when you join with like-minded women.”

—Saima Abassi

GO GREEN

Go Green Wilmette was founded in 2006 with three goals in mind: to raise environmental awareness; to inspire action; and to create a more sustainable community. It’s a true grassroots organization that works closely with local government, schools, the park district and public library, local businesses and nearby communities to achieve its mission. Of particular importance is its outreach to residents through Going Green Matters, the annual environmental fair; tree walks and yard tours; partnerships with local school gardens; and other programs. The group also provides resources and information on a range of environmental topics, from how-tos on sustainable gardening to advocating on environmental policy issues. As the first organization of its kind in the northern suburbs of Chicago, Go Green Wilmette has been used as a model for similar organizations in neighboring communities and in Lahore, Pakistan. For more information, visit GoGreenWilmette.org.



Kale, growing to seed in Saima Abassi's garden.

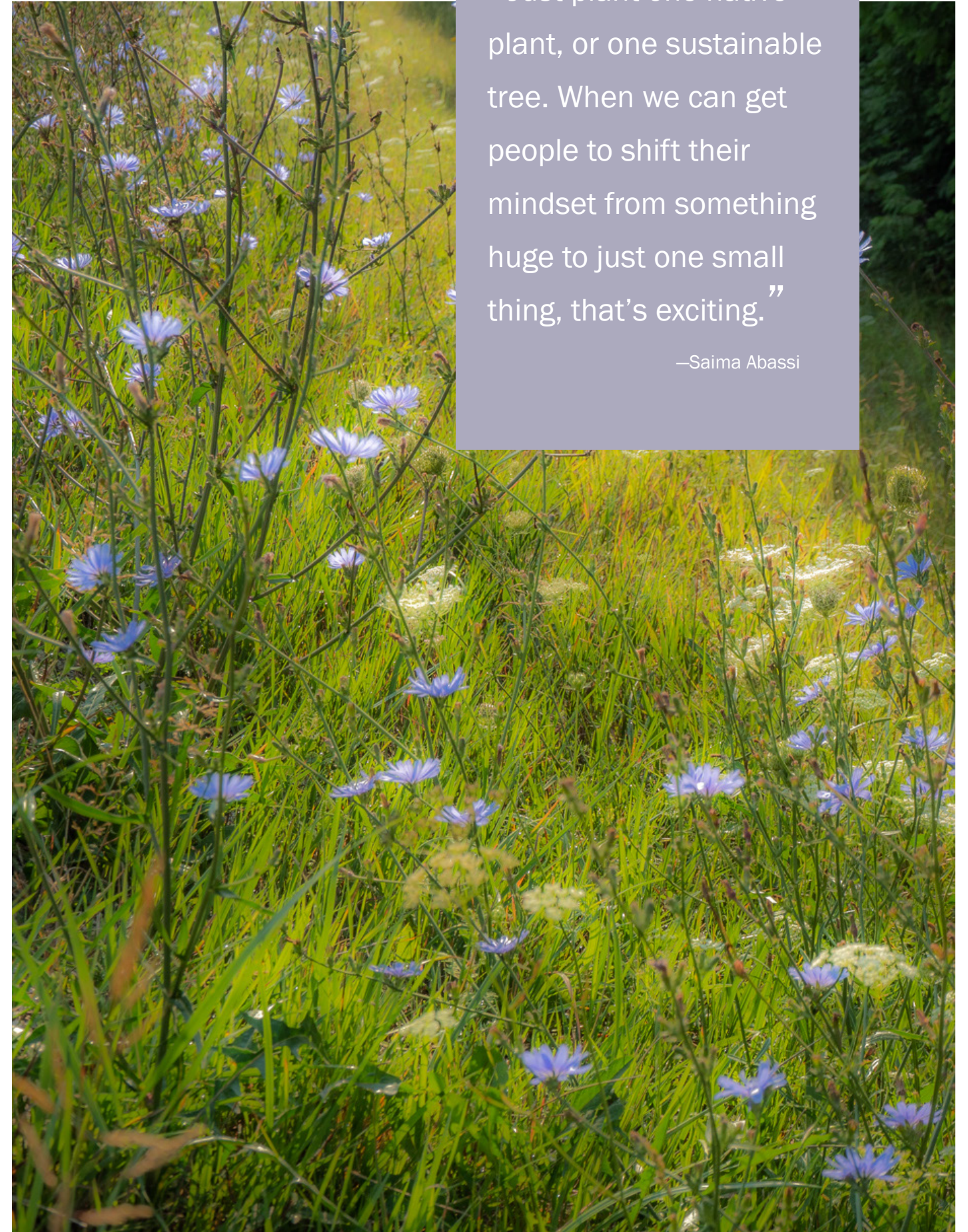
Back in her own garden, Saima wanders the rows, pointing out nasturtiums, tomatillo plants and kale, which she's allowing to grow to seed this year in part to see what will happen with the plants that are now almost four feet high. We walk over to the compost bin, and she grabs a pitchfork to turn the contents, explaining how it's important to do so in order to keep flies away. We peer inside, looking for worms. "It might be too early for them," she says.

We walk into the front yard to see the milkweed plants that she lets grow wild in her hedges because they attract monarch butterflies. She points to the broad green leaves, explaining how the monarchs lay their eggs on them, and then as caterpillars eat them for food. Milkweed plants are native plants, one of the species that Saima recommends people put in their yards as a first step to doing something good for the environment.

She has to leave soon, to lead a tour of native plants at the Chicago Botanic Garden, where she volunteers as a docent a few times a week. Her passion for nature is infectious (even I went out and bought a milkweed plant) but it's something she is equally grateful to others for encouraging in her — especially women.

"I feel like this work and the people I've found are leading me to achieve, to reach my higher self," Saima says. "Women are connectors, it's in our DNA. It just needs to be tapped in a way to bring it out".

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“Just plant one native plant, or one sustainable tree. When we can get people to shift their mindset from something huge to just one small thing, that's exciting.”

—Saima Abassi