

Audio file

[Postbac Interview.m4a](#)

Transcript

Virgil

Let's go ahead and get started here. First things first: why are you all interested in gardening and what makes it important to you personally?

Anirban

Oh I'll let these folks answer first. Please go ahead.

AJ

For me, I grew up with my grandparents. They used to fish and farm all the time in rural Washington State. And I really admired the amount of sustainability and community that they built through those practices, because even when my grandfather stopped fishing, his fisherman buddies would still drop by our house and give us salmon all the time. It was a great, wholesome experience, and I had a whole lot of fun. Fond memories about that!

Chetan

Yes, for me, I started gardening in high school, but my parents are very big into gardening too, and my family, really, in India. It's always been something that I've tried to get involved in. I found that gardening gives you a very nice sense of community because it's people who are coming together, just trying to get some work done, and you get to have these informal conversations that can develop into friendships. That's why I like gardening a lot, personally.

Anirban

So, I grew up in a big city. I never did any [gardening]. The pandemic is when I started gardening in my backyard. But over time, the reason I've gotten more interested in it is, well, one thing is that as a scientist: gardening is an experiment where you get to enjoy the fruits of your labor, which is not necessarily [common]. 90% of the experiments that we do fail, and then they tell us what to do to get the 10% of experiments that work. So in that sense, gardening is better in terms of what you enjoy out of it. But the other thing is: I've become increasingly aware of how much our carbon footprint is and that we each need to do whatever we can to make up for that. The fruit that we eat may come from Venezuela by a plane. I had no idea how much carbon footprint all of these things can have!

Virgil

That's a good point. You all had different things that inspired you to get into gardening. What would you say to someone who is curious about gardening? Maybe they want to get into it.

AJ

Honestly: just do it. I had a little bit of experience with my grandparents gardening as a kid. That certainly didn't carry over into my adulthood, I have no idea what I'm doing (laughter). But especially if you use basic plants like carrots, or if you use starts, it's very easy! Something that I've realized through Gardening Club is that you can actually get a lot of resources from your local community. Now that we have connectedness on Facebook and Nextdoor, we've been going a lot to random people's houses to take their mulch away from them because they cut down a tree and they just want it gone. And that way you get to do something that's good for the environment. It can be cheap and sustainable and honestly a lot easier than it looks from the outside.

Chetan

I would say: try to reach out to someone who does garden. Because they're going to give you a time when a lot of people are gardening in a community garden or they can give you some pointers too. And gardeners, I've found, are people that really like to talk about gardening and about what they're doing. It's a good crowd, for the most part.

Anirban

Yeah, the only thing to add is that you don't necessarily need a sprawling backyard to start gardening. I know people who – I'm from a very big, hustling, bustling city called Kolkata, it is part of India – and people just find some space on their terrace and then find ways to garden it, and get it to work beautifully. Like with most other things, when there's a will, there's a way. And again, as AJ said and Chetan said, in these days we are so much more connected, and I'm on three different groups on Facebook on vegetable gardening in the NoVA / DMV area. I'm very interested in growing citrus plants indoors. That's how I have become a member of that group on Facebook. So yeah, these are great resources.

(minor technical difficulties)

Virgil

You all talked about a good sense of community that gardening brings and getting into groups: let's zoom in on you all's group. What's it all about? How does it work? How does that operate?

Anirban

I'll just say something that these folks are not aware of and then they can add, how it's currently operating. And I think every year it evolves. So – and sorry folks: I didn't mean to be rude I just wanted to tell you some things about how it started that's back I think before you folks were here. It started in, I'd say, late 2020. I've always had this sense that – I suppose you are familiar with who post-bacs are and postdocs are; you are familiar with these terms and what these mean, right?

Virgil

Yep. *[Post-bacs are recent college graduates interested in pursuing their doctorate, and post-docs are researchers who have already received their doctorate]*

Anirban

So post-bacs, usually they are fewer here. There are a number of them and, more than post docs, post-bacs usually have more common endpoints after the post-bac: they're typically going to med school or grad school, some of them end up looking for jobs. But I always felt that the system as a whole could do better, for the post-bacs to communicate amongst one another across institutes or labs or things like that. We are in this fantastic building, Building 35, but then in the wake of the pandemic, I got the sense that newer post-bacs just arriving in the fall of 2020 were probably suffering from a strong sense of disconnect. Right around that time I got two plots of land that are on the NIH campus. I originally volunteered to take care of them and I thought that I'd probably leave my lab to do some kind of gardening activity. And then I thought of perhaps a better use for this that would have a wider impact is to see if post-bacs from all across different labs, those who were interested, would come together. This could be one way for them to do something outside, because going outside would be less risky. This was still late 2020, so we were all very scared. But some of them could come and do some things and then other groups could do it, so it could be staggered, but still could be a mode of interaction.

And that's when I reached out to the then-NINDS-Scientific-Director Lorna Role and Katherine Roche. They thought it was a great idea! So that's when the post-bac group started. And then the Gardening Group was an offshoot of that. What I did was: we had a post-bac group we used to get together, we used to have them present signs. Then they'd have their own Slack group through which they interact, and I can sit out of that. I said, you know, you need to have a place where you can kind of talk ill about the PIs and be comfortable with that. And that's important. Then some of them interested in the gardening took over organizing the whole activity. And I just provided when they needed some seeds, some soil; I just bought all of that. At the NIH, the problem is that there's no way to pump these things centrally. But, I thought that the investment in this was not that much, but the benefit was a whole lot. And then what has happened since then is that, usually twice a year, I get to send out an e-mail [which] goes to all of Building 35 [asking about] whoever is interested. The post-bacs have formed a network enough that now this has involved people that are well beyond Building 35. But now I'll let these folks tell you how they are currently organizing it. I told you a little bit about the history.

AJ

I agree with all that's been said. Really, the way that the group is sort of organized is... how could we put it in a good way? It's very much supposed to be a way for post-bacs to get to know each other at, kind of, random. So: if you have a friend that's over in Building 10 who's a post-bac who wants to work on the plot, they're more than welcome. And I totally agree that scientists and post-bacs, in particular, I feel are very good at siloing themselves off. You get so invested in "what's the next step?", "what do I have to do today?" in order to make tomorrow the best day that it can be, and the next month, so that eventually I have a good CV and I can go to PhD: you kind of get lost. And I feel like being able to leave the building and talk to other post-bacs who have that same experience it: first of all, helps you network with other people and other labs who use other techniques, which is something you might not have access to in your own lab if you don't have a lot of collaboration, but it also helps you break yourself out of that headspace. Because you're talking to people who inherently have the same problem: they spiral in the same kind of way. So yeah, there's not really many rules or regulations to it.

As Anirban said, he reaches out to people in [Building] 35 first and then usually we get, I think 10 people probably respond to that e-mail and go "yeah, I'd be interested". None of those people, maybe 7,

actually follow up. And then from those 7, you talk to them and you go, “hey, do you know anybody?” And then in the process of gardening, like recently, we messaged the post-bac Happy Hour group chat to see if anybody had a truck because we wanted to go and get some compost from the DC municipal compost thing. And from that we had another post-bac, totally not associated with Building 35, respond, that nobody ever met before, who really wants to join and so she'll be joining soon. But yeah, I think a large part of the garden and just my approach to post-bac groups and fellow groups in general is inclusivity and trying to break boundaries and not set rules or regulations for who can and can't join.

Chetan

One thing we try to do, though, is: we try to meet every Thursday. And we have a GroupMe. I think the Slack was more of something that people used in the past. But in our GroupMe, generally someone who is planning to go out just posts something and says, “hey, I'm going out – anyone free to come and help out?” It's very informal like AJ was saying, but it's sort of structured in a way where we have clear ideas of what we want to get done. It's just about helping each other in getting stuff done.

Anirban

A lot of this is new to me and it's very rewarding. I have to say that!

Virgil

I love how, almost ironically, the organization of the group is organic in a sense where it's like: we have structure, but at the same time it's a free flowing thing. That's very neat. It looks like you went ahead and answered my next question [which was] going to be how the group gets started. So we'll pop on down to the question after that.

Anirban

I saw that was there. That's why I did that. Sorry about that.

Virgil

(laughter) No, that's good. So you've talked a bit about how the group is made and how it flows and forms. Being a part of this group for some time, what do you think are some of its good strengths and where it shines, and what are some areas do you think the group could improve in the future?

AJ

I think that a lot of our strengths and weaknesses are very closely associated with the common strengths and weaknesses of scientists: incredibly ambitious, willing to try pretty much anything – at this point, we've befriended construction workers to get wood to fill out the garden box and line the garden beds with wood and we're having somebody deliver a small rain barrel so that maybe we can do some drip irrigation so that we're not out there quite as frequently, and we've just been very, very ambitious, which has been great – but we're not too terribly consistent all the time, as scientists tend to be, because we have the best of intentions and people think that they can get out there, but then something takes longer in lab and suddenly they're in lab until 7:00 PM, and they actually can't water the garden. So, consistency could certainly be better, but simultaneously, I've had people come to me and express some amount of guilt for not being able to show up on a day when they said they should. I think that the garden's biggest utility is not just producing food but producing an atmosphere where

people can relax, and I really don't want it to be a burden on people, so it's fine if our tomatoes are a little bit smaller (laughter). I don't want the garden to be stressful. So consistency could certainly be better, and I think the solution to that right now is probably just to bring in some more people. Chetan just left for med school, yay Chetan! And so, as people leave, we need more people coming in and being ambitious and don't maybe have as much on their plate yet and can go out and do those consistent things and have a good time with it. Then when they get stressed, people who have now had a break, can take back over and take up that role with consistency.

Anirban

I'll just say one thing, which is: not necessarily in response to your specific point, but I think I, in some sense, feel very lucky that every year I've had folks like AJ, and in the previous years there were others, who are happy to [take the lead]. There's someone who needs to take the lead in an organization, you see, and having one or two of these folks who are always willing to come forward and do that has been tremendous. I don't think there's any way you can make this happen [right on] target, you just have to try your best. And if you get the attention of enough people, from them, there will be some people who are willing to do this and to do this in your best faith. That's my take on it.

Chetan

I definitely second what AJ said. I think AJ is our de facto president of the Garden Club, so we really appreciate her for sure. And yeah, so the post-bacs have been very ambitious this time. I don't think that's always been the case necessarily, but the two garden plots that we were given have both been filled now and we're looking to see if we can even get some more garden space too. We also want to get into composting as well. We have two bins... we want to get some more bins! And so we're very actively looking to get more resources and more things per se. But we are a very strong group because of that.

(greeting Sumaira)

Anirban

Yeah, we've been hearing about the things that you've been up to: it's great to hear all of these things.

Sumaira

(laughter) We're just trying to find whatever that is free because we do have a lot of manpower so whatever we can find for free we'll go at it like ants.

Anirban

This is not, of course not the plan, but because I don't see you guys together so often, feel free to reach out. If it so happens that you're trying to get something and it's becoming impossible, I'm happy to do whatever I can. Ultimately, I'm a public servant, and I feel this is part of my job, paying back the taxpayer. That's how I look at it. So it's fine to reach out to me, it may not be that I'll be able to help in every case. But you shouldn't hesitate. Sorry, go ahead Virgil. Sorry, you're saying something Sumaira.

Sumaira

Oh, I was saying we do have ambitious plans that we are holding on to our budget for. We're trying to see whatever we can get for free. That way, whenever we get the opportunity, we can ask for those ambitious things.

Anirban

You know, I'm gonna share one podcast that I heard on NPR. I don't know if AJ was part of the group when I shared that last year. On weekends, there's this program on NPR, it's called [How I Built This](#). This was a podcast about two Berkeley students, management students, who basically started growing mushrooms using ground coffee. Yeah, it's amazing! People who love gardening will love this. I'll send it to you, and I'll include Virgil as well.

Virgil

Please, yes, sounds good!

Anirban

Go ahead, sorry Virgil, I think you have your questions that you want to go through.

Virgil

Ah this is great, this is awesome! But yeah, so it's really cool how you've been able to bring this group together and you've had pretty much a solid track record from starting and growing and building and having these ambitions and things. What do you think the impact of this group is going to be on the NIH in the future?

Anirban

I'll let these folks answer. Yeah, go ahead AJ. I think that we've been following an order: you and then Chetan and then Sumaira.

AJ

I really hope that other institutions and ICs at the NIH see the gardening community and think to do something similar themselves. I do feel like, especially since the pandemic, I don't know how it was before the pandemic because I wasn't here, but especially since the pandemic, there has been a pretty large lack of community in fellows, in post-bacs particularly. I love my lab, but I'm the only post-bac there, I'm the youngest person. It can be hard to relate to the people around me and I'd love to see more gardening, if it's possible. But also more activities generally at the NIH that could bring people together. One of the things I do outside of the NIH is I volunteer at the Montgomery Parks Department [and] clean up parks. And I think that that would be a great thing for labs and ICs to do together. There are a lot of things that we could do. We're the National Institute of Health and one of the biggest health crises is the climate, and I feel like we could be doing more to bring ourselves together as a community, but also to serve future generations and their medical needs by doing environmentally-conscious practices.

Chetan

Yeah, I definitely agree with AJ. I wish that other ICs would also get on this garden train and hopefully set up big mesh boxes of their own and plots too. It would be really nice if there just, was more gardens in general, I guess just like ours.

Sumaira

I'm sorry I've already lost the question. What were you asking?

Virgil

Oh, no worries. Yeah, I was just wondering, what do you envision this group's impact would be on the NIH in the future?

Sumaira

Yeah, I see. I think we're very future minded. Everything we've done we're like: OK, you know what, we're working with a plot that I don't really know the history of it, but when we came in, there were a lot of weeds and the soil isn't the best, we might not be able to grow the most this season, but that's OK. We're laying a foundation so that way next year somebody will pick it up and there will be a lot more momentum there. I think this year is definitely about building momentum and trying to just establish something so other people come in and they are encouraged to continue to work on it. Overall for post-bacs, I think it's just a great space to play around and it's also a good place to develop better mental health skills, in some ways. It's good for the mental health: being out there, you're talking to people, you can hear the birds chirping, it's just a great place to be. So I think it's a good place to play around.

Anirban

So I'll build [off that]. I just had a couple of things. I think they hit all the right points. You can get back to why I felt like starting this group. Very strongly, the one thing I hope it achieves is this communication between post-bacs that is irrespective of lab, irrespective of institute, as a way for building community. What the garden produces is important, but the importance of that community goes way beyond. Not to undermine what comes out of the gardening per se, but I think that's super important and I hope that some of these connections stay beyond the NIH. When they go on to, let's say, become independent scientists or researchers or, physicians, doctors, that these connections may end up collaborating, and who knows? The other thing that Sumaira said: it's an important thing, clearly this has been talked about. This is written about that there is a mental health crisis. There's the [CDC report](#) that it hits young people particularly badly. But I don't know if there is enough introspection into the root causes of that, and I think community building could be an important therapeutic [element]. I'm not a doctor and I'm not a social scientist, but my gut feeling is that part of the reason the mental health crisis has emerged is because we've lost some of these connections to our community for whatever reason. And rebuilding that will be therapeutic for that same reason.

Sumaira

I see this becoming a huge thing in the future. I think even more post-bacs are going to want to join and we're going to need more space.

Anirban

I hope so!

Sumaira

My two cents on that.

Virgil

Oh yeah, you all are definitely selling me on this group. This is sounding pretty interesting. Let's say, hypothetically, there was another employee, may or may not be doing an interview right now, but he's an employee, or she or they, is an employee at the NIH and they're interested in getting involved in this group in particular, how could they go about that?

AJ

Anirban can answer that better than I can! (laughter)

Anirban

(laughter) All they need to do: reach out. Not just to me: they can reach out to AJ, they can reach out to Sumaira, anyone who is in touch with the group. There's not any formal process, they just need to be interested and that's it, then they come in. If they contact me, then all I do is: I get them in contact with whoever is leading, that's AJ currently. Then they take over.

AJ

Yes, very open borders.

Anirban

Yeah, and just for clarification: post docs have been part of this. As AJ said, it's very inclusive.

Virgil

That was going to be my next question. Perfect.

Chetan

Yeah, I agree. It's super easy to join. You just need to reach out to someone in the garden, and we do have a waiver form that people need to sign. So as soon as that can get done, that's pretty much it.

Virgil

Well, this has been really fun and interesting. I was wondering: I made some questions and we weaved through it and things, but there are certain perspectives that I just don't know and am unsure of so, is there anything else you want to share?

Sumaira

I don't know about perspectives, but I think with the newsletter that you write or the little blurb I suppose that you write about us, I think that'll generate some more interest and direct people to want to garden with us. So I don't know if you were planning on giving somebody's contact information, but I think that would be really good.

Virgil

Oh yeah, I was hoping to get everyone's contact info and things of that nature afterwards.

Chetan

I agree too. It would be really great if the NIH leadership could know a bit more about this just because it would be great if this was an NIH-wide thing like it was in the past, I believe. But [it's] sort of lost touch.

AJ

I guess the comment that I have is: hopefully we end up with more garden space eventually and more people interested in gardening at the NIH. But right now, bandwidth is mildly limited by the amount of space that we have. We can't have 30 people gardening on one plot, unfortunately. But I will say that around Maryland generally and around the DC area, I have noticed a lot of community gardens that really don't appear like they're being taken care of. So somebody is reading who is a part of the NIH or can't join the garden for whatever reason or isn't a post-bac, if this has been at all inspiring to you, look for those community gardens. They're out there. They're struggling. They could always use more people. And it's just a great way to meet people in your community of all ages and different perspectives. So I think that's a good comment.

Sumaira

I have one more thing to say. Going back on what Chetan said, I really would hope that administration sees that we still exist because there are improvements that can be made to the gardens like we would love to have a comprehensive watering system where we don't have to drag out a hose. If there was any way they could hear our pleas, that would be great.

Anirban

(laughter) Virgil, I'm going to share something. This is to get back to your first question about starting gardening. So as I said, I'm a big city person and as a post doc I was in New York, another big city. I'm originally from India. And my postdoc lab was a super intense lab. It was no question of getting time off for gardening and things like that and. One day as I was entering the lab – this was Rockefeller University in the middle of New York – I get this very strong tropical smell. It's interesting because olfaction has all sorts of connections with your brain. And it reminded me of things back at home. And I said “what is this? I gotta find out!” And then I find out that it's actually an orange plant, the flowers of the orange plant. It turns out my postdoc advisor, his mother, who was then living in Florida, had bought that plant for him, and he used to take very good care of it, had a very big planter where it was sitting right outside the elevators. Then when I moved here, I had a desire to have an orange plant. I said “I really want that smell around me”. But starting a lab [that] has a tenure track, you hardly ever get anytime. So one day I remember I was just eating oranges and the seed came out. And I'm like “can you get a plant out of this?” Then I just YouTube this and then there was this one video on how you could put this in soaked paper towels in a Ziploc bag. And that whole thing worked! I was completely [stunned]! Someone who's a city-bred person, to see that you can actually take an orange seed and you can get seedling, I'm like, “seriously?!” That was my starting of gardening (laughter). Yeah, and I'm glad that I tried that.

Virgil

Yeah, I've never tried it, but I have a similar background, I've always thought that. When you're eating a fruit and like, "I wonder: if I really tried, could I make something out of this?" And it's cool to hear that the answer is yes.

AJ

When I was in undergrad, I sprouted a mango seed and it happened to be right near the end of university, it was in the summer. And one of my friends was moving down to Southern California to do a PhD at Caltech. And so I gave that mango plant to him as a little souvenir of our friendship, and it's still growing down there.

Anirban

Whoa, that's so awesome!

Sumaira

Really cool!