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Shimla variety to test why Newton's tree withered away

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AN apple tree, grafted from the descendant of the original Isaac Newton tree at Cambridge, that had a place of pride at the Inter-University Centre for Astronomy and Astrophysics (IUCAA) for many years, has been replaced with a tree from Shimla. Reason: after the tree withered away in 2006-2007, scientists decided to experiment with a domestic variety to find reasons why the tree did not survive, before trying to acquire another sapling from the Cambridge original.

The tree story began in 1994 when scientist and astrophysicist Jayant Narlikar got a sapling from the descendant of Isaac Newton's apple tree in Cambridge which was planted at IU-

CAA. However, after growing for a few years, the plant, which had formerly borne flowers, withered away. With the aim of studying the reason for the plant drying up, Narlikar has now planted saplings of apple trees from Shimla.

The idea of planting the apple tree in a city whose climate will hardly allow its growth germinated when Narlikar was giving a lecture at the Australia Telescope National Facility (ATNF) in 1993. One of his slides had the statue of Newton from IUCAA sitting in contemplation under a banyan tree. An apple, which is a part of the statue, was lying near his feet. "I remember having joked, 'Newton is worried as to how an apple fell off a banyan tree', says Narlikar with a laugh.

After returning to India, he got a



Jayant Narlikar near Newton's apple tree at IUCAA.

ARUL HORIZON

call from Ron Ekers, the director of ATNF who told him that a genuine descendant of the original tree could be acquired. "After talking to a few peo-

ple, I came to know about Brogdale Horticulture Trust (BHT) in Kent who were very helpful and sent us a few saplings. Our first attempt to plant the

tree was in 1994. However, the plants did not survive in the Pune heat. We decided to try again with grafted trees on BHT suggestion, but sadly, they sent six grafted plants by ordinary air-mail that we received about three months late. We planted the almost lifeless plants and were surprised when two of them sprouted with new leaves. Unfortunately, even these failed to live beyond a year."

In 1996, IUCAA received more grafted plants during autumn. "Only, this time, the bureaucracy came in between and the BHT were told they would need proper documents if they were to allow any plant to enter the country. However, with the help of one of my highly placed friends at the agriculture institute in New Delhi, I was

able to get the documents." These were also planted at three spots, behind Newton's and Albert Einstein's statues and one at the science and technology park at the University of Pune. Sadly, these plants withered away in 2006-2007.

"So now we have decided that before we trouble BHT for more saplings, we will try to determine reasons for which these plants withered away. A few years back, we got some saplings from Shimla and planted them here. The trees are being monitored and taken care of. Interestingly, the one behind Einstein's statue has grown quite a bit, even if it hasn't started flowering yet. We are hoping to get more saplings from the original tree, once we are done with our study," added Narlikar.