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HURRAH - we're living in Paradise

A few chapters as a sample

THE GARDEN

A long cherished dream comes true; finally one is in a climate zone where nearly everything grows in abundance, the whole year through, uninterrupted by cold, ugly months with leafless trees, empty garden beds and tasteless imported fruits and vegetables in plastic wraps.

While strolling through the area, which will soon be the new garden one sees colorful inner images of overflowing flower beds, patches with thriving bunches of vegetables and huge fruit trees. One buys garden tools such as a shovel, hoe, garden fork, flowerpots of all sizes and boxes for seedlings and one gets into action. Normally one starts by digging a garden bed and energetically ramming the new fork in the soil. You will instantly start to wonder because in most cases this has no effect whatsoever, you might as well try to ram it into the house wall. If you try again, this time with raw violence, the fork will break at the base. So there! Of course, one thought that a fork for PS\$ 150 would be sufficient to dig a few lousy flower beds, right? Wrong. So grimly one returns to the shop and no, you should not try to get a replacement for the ruined fork as they told you expressively to use it only for LIGHT garden work. By now you know that digging a little hole in the ground falls under heavy duty work; so one buys the expensive fork at PS\$ 450 which one should have done from the start. However, one storms back to the garden and again, with all the energy one can muster, rams the fork in the ground. I did just that in the beginning of my gardening career. Then I stood on the fork and in slow motion the fork I and toppled over, the dents in the soil were minuscule. I called my partner (his laugh was extremely silly) who brought a huge pickax, one of those instruments men use to break up concrete or roads. This was effective but it took him around 15 minutes per hole and then the hole was just big enough for a little bush. He himself looked as if he HAD broken up concrete. A friend of mine told me that at the beginning of her gardening career she sat for days hunched on the ground and hammered huge hard lumps of soil to crumbs because her partner had told her that this was the way to do it, especially during the dry

season. He was still from the old generation, at one with land and soil so to speak because normally one doesn't go that far. One waits until the rainfall gets more frequent between the months of June and December and then one organizes the man with the pickax. If you are unlucky and live on land with coral underneath give up all hope (so ask in advance, e.g. a neighbor). But let's assume that it's just the normal stone hard Paradisean soil. My advice is: get a few truckloads of topsoil, which is soil from construction sites; there are shops, which sell that per truckload. Of course there is no guarantee of the quality but you can always have a look at the heap before you buy it and if you cannot spot too many rocks and huge tree branches in it you can try it. Be advised that it can get costly according to the size of your garden.

Sowing lawn is not done in Paradise because the seeds wouldn't stand a chance to grow with all the heat and bugs and birds around and even if you are so crazy as to put up water sprinklers you would use an immense amount of water from your tanks. Furthermore it is illegal to water the lawn during dry season and water from the main line has such a high amount of chlorine that you might bleach the seeds rather than get them to grow. Consider as well that, if a garden should keep its looks, it has to be watered. This means around 2000 liters (a tank of 400 gallons) per watering on about 600 square meters of garden with an average amount of plants.

It is however true that in Paradise nearly everything grows besides plants, which need hibernation or cool temperatures. Whatever cuttings you have: just stick them in the ground and they will continue growing e.g. Hibiscus, Bougainvillea, even cuttings from rose bushes. Just make sure that the cutting comes from a branch one year old or more. Concerning the ideal location for flowers and bushes ask your plant dealer or an old man, they often know a lot about this topic. In the East your plants will have sunshine until late in the morning, ideal for everything, which cannot take the burning tropical sun the whole day. Most fruit trees can take it but make sure that the roots stay damp even during dry season. You can find it out by observing your garden during a dry season and see where the grass is still green when everywhere else it gets brown. Pineapple, bananas and papayas are uncomplicated, as well as the bush "Pride of Barbados" with lots of pretty flowers. Pineapple hardly needs any water; first you eat the fruit, then cut off the head with the green top and put it in the ground with the green sticking out. Normally it will develop into a new plant. Please note: pineapple often needs between two and four years to bear a fruit therefore they are quite expensive. Take the seeds of the Papayas and stick them into the soil and when the little plants are strong enough plant them in the garden. The silly thing about Papayas is that you never know in advance if the tree is male or

female and only the female trees bear fruits, the “men” grow tall and then they stand there, leafless and senseless. Papayas are not very attractive trees. Their trunks are hollow and soft and the roots short, so they topple over quite easily. Don’t plant them in a corner where they are exposed to heavy winds. They bear either once or several times according to the soil, location and other mysterious things, just give it a try.

The “Pride of Barbados” develops pods with the seeds inside. The seeds grow easily and fast. It is important never to store fruits in the fridge if you want to grow plants from it later. So remove the seeds before you put them in the fridge.

Bananas behave like any old weed; they multiply at a breathtaking speed and produce little plants, then you have to get rid of the mother plant. Bananas are antisocial and don’t like “neighbors”. You have to harvest the fruits when they are still green, shortly before they turn yellow, otherwise they all ripen at the same time and you will never be able to eat them all. It’s a sure sign that the bananas are nearly ready when the Bananaquit, a little black and yellow bird, flutters twittering around the fruits. In general the birds always know first when fruits are ready.

My Mangoes still look green and stone hard but if I see birds flying out of the tree I will always find two or three fruits which smell “ripe” with holes pecked in them, I’m so mad by now that each morning I crawl muttering around my Mango tree which is still small and I sniff at the fruits. In that way I harvest around 40% and the birds only 60%. Papayas also have to be picked when still green. Then one stores them for a few days until they are ripe. Store them inside the house (NOT in the fridge!) and not on the porch because bats, mice and lizards will discover them. One morning I found a completely intact bunch of bananas and when I looked closer it was nothing but a dummy with a totally empty inside.

You should learn to plant with the moon. I never believed in it but since doing so my fruit trees have more fruits, my cuttings grow easier and in general everything thrives. You can buy a clever little booklet called the “Mac Donald’s”, published yearly, and it tells you when to plant what. The lousy little book is always right; the given planting days are overcast or rainy which is essential for planting.

Keep an eye on the animals outside of your garden if you want to plant a hedge or beautify your fence. In general there are a few sheep or goats roaming around, nasty “eating machines”, and very difficult to chase away. They go for vines and everything with juicy green and soft leaves. Goats are extremely bad, they put their hooves against chain link fences and sooner or latter they will tear it down. They don’t like thorny and hard plants

especially when they have a choice of eating nice grass instead. So plant e.g. Bougainvillea, very hard and thorny, a nice protection against intruders of all kinds, it looks good but it can be a nuisance when you want to control it. You need very solid gloves and sharp clippers. Now and then trimming is necessary when they overgrow a pathway or scratch your face or car in walking or driving by. Sometimes they produce huge leafless branches with a few miserable little flowers at the tip. Why this is sometimes so and at other times not remains a secret. I literally had a flood of Bougainvillea around my house on "Noisy Hill", it looked like a very colorful waterfall although I didn't give them any special treatment. I took cuttings of all of them to my new house, and they grew nicely and fast. Then I planted them along my fence for beautifying purposes (and this fence really needs it!) and there they have been for the past three years, just sitting there miserable and sulky and now and then producing a lousy little branch during the rainy season, nothing to speak of. I fertilized with sheep and goat dung, I planted with the moon, watered like a thing possessed during the dry season, I bought "Miracle Grow" which inspired all the other plants to fierce flower orgies: but nothing doing, the Bougainvillea plays dead. One neighbor has the same problem but in front of another house further down the road the Bougainvilleas are an ocean of colors. Why is this so? Nobody knows, it can happen with all plants. In certain places nothing grows whatever you plant. But try it two meters further to the left or right and everything thrives. And yes, in case you ask, we dug holes as deep as graves looking for rocks, which were not there. We examined the roots of the deceased practically with a microscope for parasites or other reasons and we found NOTHING. At some point one just gives up.

Hibiscus is easy to grow whether in a dry or wet location although it prefers moist soil. There is of course a bug, which, some say, is originally from Barbados and is called "mealy bug" especially affecting hibiscus. Some say it's a fungus, others say it's a bug. What ever it is the leaves and flowers crumple to little lumpy knots and it's contagious to other plants. You have to spray, cut drastically and not throw the cuttings on the compost but burn them or get rid of them in some other way.

Compost is an excellent thing because in this climate it ripens at a breathtaking speed. Unfortunately only very few Paradisians have discovered the usefulness of compost so far, but never mind. You can still make one, just be extremely careful to throw only raw plant matter on it, grass cuttings and similar items, so it will not attract rodents and doesn't smell. Grass cuttings are good but one should leave them on the lawn as often as possible. It's excellent mulch and improves the quality of your soil enormously. I have

a perfect example in my back yard where the lawn regularly develops into a mud hole during the rainy season as the property is at the bottom of a hill. Whenever the soil is saturated the water just collects in pools on the surface of my back garden. Since leaving on the grass cuttings and planting swamp plants the situation has improved considerably.

Also the grass is finer than before being less hard and razor sharp. These are the little tricks of the tropics. First you have to try out all kind of things and see what works.

The topic of the compost brings us directly to the growing of vegetables. We now know what it involves to dig a garden bed. Veggie plants are best bought in the market at the beginning of the rainy season around Corpus Christi. Once in the soil, the nice expensive veggie plants grow satisfactorily and fast but be aware that you have to avoid locations fully exposed to the sun. Plant in the half shade (also avoid midday and afternoon sun) or have bushes (e.g. Pride of Barbados) around the bed, which automatically shade it.

Trees can be tricky if their roots undermine the soil. Don't be fooled especially by palm trees: they have incredibly long roots creeping through the length and width of your garden.

At this point allow me to digress a little: if you want to build a pool that is shaded don't plant anything around it with aggressive roots or your pool will very soon be history. The same applies for underground water tanks. If the tree of your choice has "pool friendly" roots make also sure that it doesn't shed all its leaves and/or flowers at some time of the year; otherwise you will either be bobbing up and down in a green murky pond or you will spend more time with a net cleaning the pool than swimming in it.

Back to the vegetable bed: be prepared that vegetables can behave the same as any other plants. Some things just don't grow in certain spots and in others they thrive marvelously. After planting regular watering is crucial. Of course there are the many insects e.g. butterflies. Butterflies are lovely but they lay eggs and out of the eggs come the caterpillars and if you are a friend of insecticide-free gardens you will see thousands of caterpillars happily munching their way through your vegetables. They favor veggies with soft skin like Zucchini, eggplant and sometimes cucumbers. Carrots are tricky to plant because of the hard soil. On the other hand you will hardly find any snails but the amount of caterpillars make up for that. It is nearly impossible to grow any type of cabbage without spraying insecticide.

Beans and tomatoes are easier although tomatoes can develop a kind of fungus, which makes them look perfect from the outside but when you cut

them open they are black and rotten inside.

Once I had a total glut of cucumber, growing, of all places, underneath an orange tree. The cucumbers were growing into the tree; dozens of huge specimens were hanging in the tree between the oranges, a bizarre and stunning sight. It never happened again, isn't that typical?

Ants are very annoying pest, especially leaf cutters. They strip a bed bare in one night without any problems. But more about them in the next chapter. Be prepared that growing veggies in the Caribbean is time consuming and not outstandingly successful without the application of insecticides. You can of course concoct a garlic brew (5 cloves in 5 liters of water) and after letting it stand for four days you pour the mix on your beds with a clothes peg on your nose. But what if it rains which it often does and which is utterly necessary for the plants to grow? Enough of growing vegetables: I just wanted to explain a general approach. Anything else you have to test on your own.

You will of course plant many flowers in pots and put them around the house, on the porch, along the driveway and other locations. It is advisable to purchase a huge pack of "Promix" which is mainly pressed peat and has to be thoroughly watered before use and then it can be used to fill the pots.

You can mix it with "normal" soil if you like. If you use it unmixed it is not very nourishing so you should fertilize. Without "Promix" you might have a problem with sensitive plants because the garden soil is so terribly hard and lumpy. In Paradise one plants in all kind of containers: concrete, plastic, clay, empty paint buckets, in whatever people get their hands on. Concrete is not as bad as it sounds if you paint it nicely and it's quite resistant. Clay pots are often not properly fired and so, after a short time, they fall to pieces. Plastic does the same if it's a cheap pot. Always buy the expensive brand just like with the garden fork or after some weeks, when you handle your pot, the bottom and sides crumble in your loving hands. The tropical sun kills everything sooner or later, especially plastic which will become brittle and crack.

In the beginning one will tend to over water the pots although "Promix" needs more water, as it is very dry. In other pots the wetness keeps for days especially in plastic. If your plants get brown and soft at the edges of the leaves then you have over watered.

After some years of fierce experimenting one fine day you will find yourself in a flowering garden; from the pots grow cascades of beautiful flowers, the Mango tree has fruits in abundance, the Bougainvillea looks miserable but who cares and you buy your veggies at your local "special market lady" who gets it from an uncle who specializes in natural growing methods. She even

shows you the sprayed “normal” versions so you can trust her. Your friend, gardener or whoever it may be regularly fights his way through the madly growing lawn with the help of this rotating instrument from hell, locally called a “weed whacker”. “Normal” lawn mowers would expire in a short time because of the thousands of stones and rocks hidden in the soil. So, you find yourself at 7 in the morning in the garden, holding a hose and for a short while you feel completely happy and proud (until you discover a trail of leaf cutters, but this is neither here nor there...)

LIVING WITH ANIMALS AND INSECTS

Of course this will not be a complete listing of the existing animals and insects in Paradise, rather a short presentation of the most common cohabitants and neighbors.

First of all there are the ants: they exist in an endless variety and in all sizes and they are simply everywhere. They are minuscule, small, medium sized or huge, they are black, red, multicolored, with thick heads, slim and longish or short and stumpy, anything is possible. The minuscule ones seem to materialize out of nowhere and love crumbs and food droppings of all kinds. Although harmless they are a nuisance because once they have moved in you cannot get rid of them again. They can cover a piece of meat in a short space of time like a black moving blanket (other species do that as well of course...). But they don't hurt you. Then there are the big black ones, or the two colored ones, both harmless, and then there is the “black engine” (local name!), which burns like hell because it pinches a tiny piece of flesh out of your skin. It does that without any obvious reason, simply because one is standing or walking around in its way. Most ants live in the garden, under stones you put there for decoration and you want to clean once in a while, or under flowerpots you want to clean or under garbage bins you want to clean or under heaps of grass and leaves you want to rake away, or under water tanks you want to clean. In general they bring you to a screeching halt if you want to get into any energetic gardening. They run around aimlessly dragging millions of eggs up and down and building roads and you get fed up just looking at them and pondering how to get rid of all the mess. But sometimes you just have to when weeding or potting plants etc. Always wear garden gloves (black engine!) and put them on before you lift up anything. Termites and leaf cutters are a disaster; unfortunately they are very common and equally disgusting. Termites are very small and round; they devour anything, which is not chemically treated also stone- hard wood and they love all natural fibers. This includes everything made from cotton or cotton

mixtures like canvas shoes, furniture (here preferably the backside or underside of drawers from where they then proceed) boxes and cartons of all kinds and of course everything else made from wood. They construct long solid tunnels leading towards their next target and they run up and down inside. Clear warning signs are dark brown curvy tracks getting longer every day e.g. along the house wall directed towards the roof. You will find those tracks or “highways” on all items they are eating up. They murdered my 44 banana boxes after they had finally arrived by ship (see chapter “Neighbors”) and which had always come in very handy when moving house. One fine day when I wanted to rearrange the heap of boxes they simply crumbled into tiny pieces; some of them still formed a thin frame in the shape of a box which was completely hollow inside. Furthermore they devoured a few sets of cotton sheets (very hard to find in Paradise!), quite a few shoes (inconveniently one per pair), as well as T-Shirts and tablecloths, which now show an interesting pattern of holes. They covered both office desks and the built in closet with highways inside and outside and were rapidly advancing towards the wooden room doors. Initially they came through the tiny cracks in the concrete floor, which opened up during the last small earthquake. If you want to get rid of them you have to proceed as follows: carry all infested items gingerly into your garden and burn them. The items you don’t want to burn (bed, furniture etc.) you have to spray with a horrible stinking mixture strongly resembling turpentine. Do this wearing a protective mask, avoid going into the treated room for several days and air it thoroughly. This is especially lovely when treating bed frames and closets full of clothes. The smell will linger for weeks. You have to repeat the treatment as soon as you discover a new “highway” but after the first “round” one is normally shocked enough to creep around under beds and tables every couple of weeks and investigate. If they have already reached the roof and you are a fanatic

about “anti chemical treatment”,(you should burn down the house or move house. In case of chemical treatment you should consider staying somewhere else for a few weeks until you can watch TV without weeping permanently because of the lingering vapors. And to all fans of herbal remedies: no, I never tried to soak the house with thousands of gallons of garlic brew poured from a helicopter and I don’t intend to.

The leaf cutters on the other hand don’t bring down the house but they can definitely destroy a garden. They eat nearly everything green but have of course certain preferences which are: Exora, Hibiscus, young leaves from orange trees, Oleander and even Bougainvillea and, most of all and unfortunately, STRAWBERRIES! I mention them because the import was

tricky and complicated and growing them difficult and time consuming. The leaf cutters residing in Auntie Kay's garden easily terminated the first three plants in one night and the last survivor I desperately put on a kind of little pedestal, which I placed in a tub filled with water. I even poured some salad oil on the water because the disgusting creatures even swim. I observed them grimly circling the rim of the tub and pondering. Fortunately I finally found their "home hole", if not, I'm sure, sooner or later they would have constructed a little rowing boat from leaves. There are no strawberries in Tobago. A friend of mine has a theory that in the collective subconscious or in the genes of the leaf cutters some information is stored about strawberries and as soon as they get the smell they freak out. (Imagine you would smell and find a ripe Mango in the snow on top of the Bavarian Alps). I had to find a solution for the strawberries, as the "pedestal in tub" idea had its flaws as mosquitoes love to lay their eggs in stagnant water even if there is oil on the surface. The oil decomposes in the heat after a few days, then you have a horrible brew and the water has to be renewed. For now my solution goes like this: take a few concrete bricks and put a board across them. Place the pots with the strawberries on the board. Smear a thick layer of motor grease about half way up each brick and the ants cannot crawl over it. So there! Here is some interesting information about the leaf cutters: they live in societies deep down in earth holes. They strip clean a certain amount of plants and drag the cut particles into the hole. One can see them marching along holding pieces of leaves over their heads like umbrellas, so one can quite easily identify their preferred plant. However it's more difficult to follow them to their home hole. In this hole they store their loot and form a big fungus with it, which they eat while they wait until "their" plants recover and grow leaves again. They never kill it totally. It's a very intelligent method, if you really think about it, but a gardener can hardly appreciate it. If you find the hole there are a few possibilities to solve the problem: pour motor oil inside, set it on fire or put down a bait (which you can buy in any supermarket) under their preferred plant. They will drag it away, eat it in their hole and later they die from it. The bait seems to taste delicious because they carry it away immediately. I prefer the "bait method". You cut a hole into a plastic bottle, put some crumbs of the bait inside and put the bottle with the hole pointing to the ground next to a plant or the hole. Why the bottle? To keep the bait dry in case it rains and to prevent any pets from eating it, of course!

Then there are many harmless species of frogs, which come to life as soon as it starts raining more frequently. The shrill high-pitched whistling heard during the night time are tiny tree frogs, not night birds. They are almost

everywhere; there is no area in Paradise where you cannot hear them. According to the loudness (high-pitched or deep bass) you can guess the size of the amphibians from tiny frogs to huge toads, also harmless. Sometimes they bob in the dog's water bowl to the poor dogs utter confusion, or they sit under a specific outside light and wait for insects to fall down, a sort of BBQ for frogs. Don't touch the toads, they secrete a poisonous substance which can cause severe skin irritations. Dogs can die from contact with them. Everywhere in and around the house you will find the "wood slaves" or lizards: they are green, brown or white and can be quite useful as they eat mosquitoes, but in the house they can become a big nuisance because they literally shit everywhere, sometimes in a liquid form. Then you find those lovely deep brown smears running down the wall. Their excrements form heaps everywhere they run: behind and on shelves, staircases, books, plants, closets, lamp shades; the amount of shit one has to shovel away every week is unbelievable. They also behave very territorially; they fight with each other on walls and ceilings and utter squeaking or snorting sounds, during heated fights one or the other might fall on your head. And no, you will not get rid of them, NEVER! Their bigger relatives, the garden lizards or ground lizards, live in big holes in the garden. They are beautifully colored, harmless and contribute to the fitness program of my dog, which chases them but never catches them. I could swear that they just have a good time with him and his clumsy attempts to catch them. They pass him in moderate speed and when he is furiously running behind them they change direction at lightning speed (to do that they stand up and run on all four legs) and the dog smashes into some obstacle. After the collision you can regularly observe the lizard leisurely strolling away into the opposite direction. Then, there are, of course, (of course, there are) the bats which are useful as well by eating mosquitoes but beware that they don't move in under your roof permanently. The excrements and the smell are quite horrible and it's very difficult to get rid of them. Sometimes it helps to hang some strips of aluminum foil from the ceiling. Maybe it confuses their radar, who knows? Scorpions are scarce in inhabited areas but sometimes you may find one in the house. They love to hide under stones or dry heaps of all kinds (old clothes, boxes and similar things); so don't forget to put on the garden gloves! Their bite is not deadly but very painful and the hospital has an antidote. I have a Paradisean friend who is a radical believer in natural healing methods. He kills them and preserves the corpses in rum and this brew, he says, is the best antidote. Whenever one is in his home beware not to touch any flasks stored on kitchen cupboards: one may find a few preserved scorpions grinning at you through the glass. He adds a few

mysterious ingredients, the names of which he never reveals to make the brew even more effective, so he claims.

If you find a scorpion in the house there are for sure several very humane methods to deal with the situation adequately. I always feel utterly terrified and I cannot change that. So normally from the porch I drag an oversized brick, much larger than the poor animal, and I come down on the scorpion like a ton of bricks, (the result always looks like a fossil), or I look for the biggest garden shoe and with a terrible blow I press the scorpion into the wall. Fortunately they are quite slow. If somebody cleans the land next to you, you should be alert because most likely they destroyed a little scorpion habitat there and a few homeless and irritated scorpions will be roaming around.

Cockroaches are a part of tropical living and the less garbage you keep in the house the less roaches you will find. They will more likely come in from the garden and investigate. You can buy roach baits in the supermarkets, if put the traps up they eat the bait greedily and later they die. Since I put up these traps I hardly find roaches in the house. There is unfortunately the flying kind of roach, which comes in through windows or falls in your plate from above; they are just there, with or without garbage. You have to reach the mental stage to be able to consider them as big bugs (avoid thinking of them as roaches), then you are able to deal with them in a more relaxed way. I am still working on it. Never trample on them: their carapace is very hard and the female roaches carry the eggs under their belly. So, if you crush them, you smear the eggs on your shoe sole and distribute them nicely all over your house. **The right method is: knock them unconscious and then throw them out, or into the toilet and flush them down or something similar.**

Then of course there are the birds. The most common ones being (here I will use the local names): the Bananaquit (small, yellow and black), many kinds of doves, which are quite quarrelsome as you can observe when feeding them; they slap their wings on each others heads. Then there is the Mot Mot, a beautiful, very colorful but shy bird, as big as a Parrot with an arrow shaped tail. You have to offer him food patiently (they love dried cheese!). Furthermore there is the Blue Jean (of course very blue), the Housebird, which looks like a sparrow, loves to build nests IN the house and twitters extremely loud. Then there is the Grassbird, which builds its nests simply in the tall grass or in small bushes, the Chow Chow (slim, gray brown, longish beak) which builds nests nearly everywhere, the Blackbirds, Parakeets and many more. In a nice garden you will have lots of birds, they will use nearly every nook and cranny to build a nest and they do this constantly. If you have airbricks they will walk through the holes into the house, they fly in

and out through open windows and doors, they swing from mobiles and lampshades and feel very much at home. The strangest nesting places I have found so far were: hollow bricks, the hole on top of a lamp shade, the back side of a fan coral fixed to the wall, hanging pots with plants, fruit stands of palm trees, paper baskets and bathroom cabinets (the last two objects were abandoned before the nest was half finished) and mail boxes. If you disturb them they might get angry, fly low and peck you on the head; it reminds me very much of the Hitchcock movie. The weirdest thing I ever observed was a Chow Chow (the bird!) following a peaceful lazy cat and pecking it again and again in the behind until it hid whimpering under a low chair.

Now and then you might see a harmless brown garden snake and spiders of terrifying size are scarce, at least I have never seen one in the house so far. Of course they exist, big as a man's fist and very hairy, but normally they live in the bush or rainforest.

Let's assume that by now you understand the sense of a fence in Paradise. In this way you avoid having the following animals standing right in front of your house door: lots of cocks and fowls, sheep, goats and stray dogs, just to name a few. A simple fence doesn't keep the fowls out; the best remedy is to fix fine wire mesh to the gate up to a height of about 50 cm and do so at all spots where a fowl could squeeze through. If you don't do it you will find dozens of them with their brood in your garden, messing up the mulch around your plants, destroying your garden beds and, of course, crowing and cackling constantly and I mean 24 x 7.

Paradisian cocks especially (Especially Paradisian cocks) remind me of Paradisian men: day and night they prance around senselessly as proud as Punch, make noise and run crowing behind every female in sight whether she likes it or not, and the rest I leave to your imagination. And yes, this mean little remark fills me with deep satisfaction. Cocks are everywhere in Paradise besides maybe in the depths of the rainforest or on the runway at the airport, although, wait a minute, I have seen one there as well! Hens and cocks fly only if absolutely necessary; so fine wire mesh will normally keep them out of the yard. A dog like ours ("good boy" see chapter "Neighbors") helps enormously. If you discover big lumpy shapes in e.g. your Mango tree in the evening or in the morning and you investigate more closely you will find out that they are sleeping fowls sometimes with baby fowls stuffed under their bellies. And YES, fowls like to sleep on trees in Paradise.

Treatment: catch them with a big butterfly net (problem: who has a butterfly net?), stuff them in a bucket and throw them out into the bush about a mile away from your home. It has some effect after about the tenth round. Fowl brains are tiny and a favorite "sleeping tree" is hard to give up.

Now and then when taking guests to the airport they remark reproachfully that we could really have arranged an accommodation for them without a cock in the neighborhood and after I patiently explain the above mentioned they get irritated and condescending and reply that I shouldn't tell them such a load of bull.... Well, I hope they read this book and forever hold their peace.

There will nearly always be some goats or sheep in your neighborhood, in ideal cases they are attached to a rope. The owners bring them to the grazing spot in the early morning and in the evening they will hopefully pick them up again. The average Paradisian, and let's not be fooled about that, doesn't care much about his animals and so sometimes he forgets them or is too lazy to come. The animals tend to bleat during the night especially if they didn't get any water during the day. This is extremely nice if they are tied underneath or close to your bedroom window. There is only one way to stop the noise: go out with a bucket full of water and let them drink and, if you ever see the owner, utter some silly remarks. In very serious cases of stubbornness wait until late in the night, sneak to the rope and untie the knot. The animal will not run far anyway and at least you can enjoy a good night's sleep. Many animals pull at their rope until they loosen it and can get away, so the owner will not get suspicious. They won't tie the animals back at the same spot as the grass there is already eaten.

As mentioned earlier, goats and sheep are unrelenting "eating machines", so think before you plant nice bushes at your fence. If the animals cause any damage and if talking to the owner doesn't help you can drag them (the animals!) to the nearest police station but this is a big and unpleasant action and should be avoided unless the owner is unknown. Be prepared for a lot of noise if a goat or sheep has young ones. They are quite cute when they are babies but as soon as they start to explore their surroundings (and at that stage they are not tied up yet), the mother sheep, which is of course tied to a rope will constantly bleat and make noise for weeks to lure her offspring back to her side (often in vain). See the hints above to put an end to it.

Despite several explanations of goat and sheep owners it is still a mystery to me why many Paradisians have this urge to mind goats and sheep. The locations where they let them graze often belong to somebody else, just an empty lot. There are no serious attempts to produce milk or cheese in Paradise (which would be very desirable!), now and then people drink goats' milk but not to a great extent. Sheep wool also is not used (all sheep in Paradise have short hair), only the meat is consumed, mostly tough as leather as the slaughtered animals are already very old. Goat meat is a national dish, that much is true, and many say that the sale of a nice, fully grown goat or

sheep brings in a good deal of money (up to PS\$ 1500), but first the animals have to grow for several years. Oh well, I don't have to understand everything...

Stray dogs are a pest on the island, they tear open every plastic bag they can get hold of (take good care that your outside garbage bin is always closed), they have diseases and parasites like worms, mange, fleas etc, and they procreate constantly. If this process regularly takes place in front of your garden door, you will, as much as you might like dogs, start to fling stones. You can do this without aiming at them; a raised arm usually chases them away. You also cannot bring every stray dog to the SPCA (Society to Prevent Cruelty against Animals) because they are overrun with strays. Sad to say, many of them have an owner who doesn't care, but as soon as you want to intervene he will emerge from somewhere and warn you off. It reminds me a lot of some Paradisean relationships mostly by males towards females, but let's not go into that right now...

You always have to be alert for mice and rats in the house but traps and poison normally keeps them at bay. It is tricky using poison because most likely you will smell the result but you have to search a long time for the corpses.

I nearly forgot to mention the land crabs. They also reside in garden holes and according to the size of the hole you can estimate the size of the crab. They eat grass and other delicacies and take up residence if they like the garden. I've had two so far, one of them I named Herman. One evening he rattled into my kitchen (they normally don't do that but there are some kind of weird vibes between animals and me) and there he sat. Looking at him in the dark he resembled a huge spider and I nearly had a heart attack. After a closer inspection I put a bucket over Herman as he was quite big (about 50 cm in diameter), had very sharp claws and panicked when I tried to shoo him out of the kitchen with the broom. The next morning I asked my partner for advice who then explained to me their strange ways. Later on Herman paid a few more kitchen visits or he sat under a little rock in the garden and threatened the dog, which wanted to sniff at him. After moving house I discovered another Herman in the garage. This time he sat on the toolbox where he had somehow got stuck with one of his claws. We wrestled a bit and solved the problem and now Herman II lives in the garden, again under a little rock, and rattles with his claws. Or maybe it's always the same Herman who follows me. Crabs are very shy and why they try to socialize with me is an unsolved mystery. Maybe they can feel that I don't want to throw them into a pot the minute I see them.

These are the most frequent and common animals and insects you will meet

daily when living in Paradise. After some years you will get withdrawal symptoms if you don't see a certain species for some time: "Where is that damned toad, I haven't heard it for days?" or "Did somebody finally throw the bloody cock in a pot? I haven't heard him crow since Tuesday!" and then of course: "Where is Herman today?"

THE MOST COMMON EXCUSES IN PARADISE

A major problem is being on time. Don't expect any excuses from an average Paradisian if he/she is late, or even doesn't turn up at all on the appointed day. Furthermore, Paradisians have a massive problem with excuses. Why they look like they are suffering incredible pain when uttering a few mollifying words whenever they screw up, is a mystery to me and many others. Would it mean questioning their entire existence? It is incomprehensible why so many normal and bright looking individuals find such deep satisfaction in lustfully trampling upon the time of their fellowmen without the slightest regret or feeling of guilt. But on the other hand they complain constantly about the unreliability of Paradisians, an equally idiotic attitude. I bluntly refuse to have any contact with such persons; I admit it, except in emergency situations like e.g. government offices etc. Mind you, we are not talking about a Southern European, easy going "manana" (= tomorrow) mentality, which can, if not imposed in an overdose, be quite relaxing at times. No, no, we are talking about a constant and complete negation of all appointments or schedules involving other persons with the expectation that nobody complains nor looks for more reliable partners. These time killers have the nerve to SULK when the injured party tells them firmly and politely to leave if they appear six hours or even three days after a set appointment (of course without giving any excuse or explanation).

But let's talk about the others; all those who are quite civilized and able to formulate excuses. One can live with that up to a certain point.

Here are a few interesting excuses offered when somebody is late, some might even be true:

"I wanted to call you but it was already so late!"

"My phone home isn't working and the battery of my cell was empty!"

"I fell asleep and didn't wake up for five hours; would you believe it!"

"My goat had young ones!"

"It was raining!" (This is a very frequent excuse: no Paradisian would take an umbrella and hurry to his car in a tropical shower. Well, I did it a few times and looked as if I had come straight out of the ocean and the car seat

was damp for days; so I admit it makes some sense to wait, but if there are urgent appointments there is no other way!

“The little wooden shack next to my neighbor’s house was burning; the son set it on fire after an argument with his girl friend and so we all had to try and put out the fire!”

“There was no pressure in the main (water pipe) and my water tanks were empty, so I had to drive to the next hydrant, fill buckets and tote them home!”

“A tree fell on the road and blocked it and the cars had to wait three hours for the guys with the truck to remove it!”

“My car didn’t start and my neighbor’s car broke down and the road taxi took half an hour to travel three miles.”

“I had a flat tire and then the jack broke!”

“I had to drive to the “Government Farm” to get some milk for the baby goats because the mother has a breast infection, but at the farm they weren’t done milking so I had to wait and then the guy who distributes the milk, had to drive to town urgently, so I have to go back there in three hours because I still have no milk!” (Although this story was true, one is, like so many times before, on the verge of screaming...)

One wants to pick up a document from the bank for the tax man and they tell you it

will be ready the same day. Later in the bank: “We had a power outage and the computers didn’t work.”

Two days later: “The secretary had to go to Hell to a funeral and the others had too much work to do” (ha ha ha!)

Two weeks later: “This has to be done with a typewriter and our typist is sick and she is the only one who can type!”

Three weeks later: “We put the document in the mail yesterday!” (NO, please tell me it’s not true! It will normally take another week to arrive in the mail)

On Monday you take the car to the painter and he tells you it will be ready on Friday.

Wednesday: “The paint was not enough”. Thursday: “Today we couldn’t work because it rained and nothing would dry!” Friday: “We finish it over the weekend, you can pick it up Monday!” Monday: “The sprayer had to go to Hell for a funeral but he should be back tomorrow.” Tuesday: “The sprayer didn’t come to work and he didn’t call and we have no idea where he is.” Thursday: “The sprayer is still in Hell because his mother is very ill

but the car will be ready on Monday, no problem!” Monday: “Not today, it rained yesterday night and the first layer of paint wasn’t quite dry and now there are a lot of these tiny flies on the car and I have to remove them first, but tomorrow...!” Tuesday there is a remote possibility that the car is ready, if it didn’t rain overnight, of course.

You want to buy a vacuum for the cars and a certain brand seems to be reasonable and good. Employee: “We would not recommend it because we only have two bags left for it.” “Can you order them?” “Yes.” “How long would that take?” “I don’t know.” “Is it possible that this type of bag is not in stock any more?” “Yes, it’s possible.” Before you throw a wobbly just leave.

You see some nice clay lampshades for the usual bulbs sticking out of the house walls, you need twelve but the shop has only three left. “I need twelve clay shades”. “We only have three left.” “Can you order them?” “Not really, there is this lady who does do them, somewhere in the country and sometimes she passes by and then we buy them.” “Can you contact the lady?” “No, she has no phone but next week she should pass.”

One week later: “No, we didn’t see the lady yet.”

Four weeks later: “No, the lady didn’t come yet.”

Two months later: “Yes, the lady came but the lampshades were no good, they weren’t burnt properly, you see. But next week I go to Hell and I know a guy there who does these shades and I will bring twelve for you.”

Two months and two weeks later: “Oh boy, I forgot about your lampshades! But next week I have to fly to Hell again and don’t worry, I will not forget!”

Three months later: “I thought about them, yes, but the guy in Hell didn’t have any, he said he sold the last five a week ago. He should have some more next month or so...” At some point one grimly buys slightly discolored lampshades with not matching patterns out of different shop windows.

You want to withdraw a big amount of money (and in Paradise anything over around US\$ 1000 is “big”). The funds rest in a Money Trust Company, they write a cheque for the desired amount and then you have to go to a regular bank to cash the cheque. It takes one day to get the cheque. It takes five days to cash it unless it’s not crossed or is a manager’s cheque, signed by both managers of the Institute, one of them sits in Hell. You explain in detail several times that you must have an uncrossed or a manager’s cheque. The next day you get your cheque, crossed, no signatures.

“Sorry about that, but the girl who did that is not in, she is attending a

funeral in Hell. But it's possible that the manager in here signs the cheque".
Fine, one trots to the bank with the manager's signed cheque:

"Okay, the money will be in your account in five days!"

"No, I need the money TODAY, besides, where is the problem? The cheque is signed by the manager.

"I have to ask my supervisor."

The supervisor: "There is one signature I don't recognize, so we cannot pay out the amount."

You stomp back to the first Institute; the "unknown" manager calls the supervisor in the bank.

"You can now go and get your money, everything is okay."

Back in the bank:

"The supervisor stepped out for lunch (it's around 11 am) and is supposed to be back at around 12.30"

Now this is getting ticklish because you need the money for the license office and the cashier there closes at 12.30. Only if you pay by 12.30 will they then license your new rental car, which is already ordered by a customer for the following morning for three weeks. The chief of the license office will sign the car papers after you have paid but he has an appointment at 2 pm and is one of the few punctual individuals in this country.

The entire procedure wasn't deliberately left to the last minute, as you might guess by now, everything just takes an incredible amount of time and

"Murphy's Law" is always present. Miraculously the supervisor of the bank is already back from lunch at 12 pm but she still has to call the manager of the Institute one more time and the manager in Hell as well. The lines are busy for a long time. At 12.23 you can finally grab your money, race to the license office and at 12.29 fall on your knees in front of the cashier's counter and beg that she still takes it. If you haven't

antagonized her in the past she will take the money, otherwise she will leave, wordlessly. We made it...!! I dimly seem to remember that the

customer who rented the car was one of the famous prattlers: "What a life you have! All day long lying under palm trees!"

WASHING MACHINES AND OTHER OBJECTS OF DESIRE

At times it can be tricky to buy simple household items in Paradise. You might see "special offers" on items which you have always wanted e.g. a nice mixer or toaster but unfortunately you don't really need the item at the time, you didn't plan the expense or you already have one which you paid much more for when you bought it.

Let's take a simple example like the purchase of a washing machine. All continental Europeans should be aware that washing machines in the Caribbean normally don't have an inbuilt heater. Everybody either washes with cold water and throw tons of bleach in the machine or they have a water heater which connects to the machine. There was a time in Paradise when one furniture shop (out of two) had a European model with an inbuilt heater. Of course I bought it instantly – there weren't many interested local customers as Paradiseans are sluggish when it comes to unknown electrical appliances. They wash like grandma did, to hell with the environment and "long live the bleach!" The European machine was delivered to my house and I was exceedingly happy because so far I had used my landlady's machine and it had shredded some of my favorite dresses by knotting them around the rotating "paddle" in the middle of its "belly". I also proudly bought an environmental friendly detergent (well, let's say one without bleach...). Then I sat in front of my machine and watched the rotation process, slightly demented but happy. This is a typical phenomenon: you are overjoyed about simple things, which in Europe are considered as only slightly disturbing happenings in the daily routine. So far so good. After a few cycles my bathroom was suddenly flooded and once again the advantage of Paradisean buildings became obvious. You simply open the house door and the water drains out into the garden, no basement is under water, no outraged neighbor is yelling at you and no landlord shoves mind-boggling bills for water damaged walls etc. in your face. However, something wasn't right. So I called the shop and miraculously the same day a car drove into the yard and a very young and a very old man climbed out. They were equipped with all the soothing instruments one could expect from mechanics like tool kits, hammers and such things. The brand of the machine caused a heavy frown; the management obviously hadn't informed them properly about the problem. But as they uttered the normal guttural grunts of all mechanics in the world and started to unscrew, examine and reattach various parts of the machine I remained optimistic. After half an hour it was, however, clear that they had only opened it and were admiring the concrete block inside; it seemed that they had never seen anything like it before. When I told them about the flooding mystery they had the idea that it could be due to the varying pressure in the main line, sometimes heavier than other times, when the system switched from using the main line system to the water tanks. As I'm not totally dumb, I had thought about that before and experimented with various set ups and I had got different results: sometimes flooding and sometimes not on using various settings obviously according to how the machine felt on a certain day. In brief, the two gentlemen were at work for at

least three hours and left highly satisfied, again assuring me that they had never seen or ever repaired such a machine before. The following washing process was incident free, after that I had to open the house door again. I never called the shop again. This happened eight years ago and I still have the machine. It washes busily and nicely, now and then it overflows but of course I always arrange many buckets and cloths around it. It has become a part of the washing process AND I can wash with hot water! I heard rumors that “my” brand is hardly in stock any more and it makes me shiver only thinking of the expiry date of my beloved machine!

After buying a washing machine and at the same time taking into consideration the first modest profit of our business I went on a shopping spree to buy a fridge and a sound system. I hadn't even considered bringing it from Europe to Paradise due to the different voltage especially in rented apartments. I had to go to Hell anyway and decided to buy everything there because Hell has a much wider variety of big shops. So said so done! I chose two very nice items, good brands at good prices; that was in the beginning of July and I waited in Paradise for the delivery.

I had been warned that it could take a few weeks but the shop had a branch in Paradise to refer to. August came and went as well as September and then it was October and by then the Hellian employee in charge of my order recognized my voice on the phone. At the end of September one could detect pity in his voice. For weeks he was investigating and reported several times that my fridge had been delivered to a different customer by mistake and that they were waiting for a next shipment from abroad. My fridge came one fine morning at the beginning of November and believe me, all fury evaporates if you are finally able, after four months, to put up the thing, touch it and talk to it (especially if the former

Zzzxxx approx. (about) fifty year(s) old fridge belonging (ed) to the landlady and you were hardly finished with the process of defrosting the thing when it formed a new layer of ice on the inside – leave open kitchen door to drain water from defrosting process!) So, the lovely new fridge was there, my sound system was still missing and the delivery guys, as could be expected, didn't have a clue what I was prattling about.

So again I phoned my old friend, Roy was his name, in the Hellian shop. Our relationship had reached to a stage where we asked each other about our plans for Christmas. He was truly disgusted by the missing sound system (and this means something) and promised me further intense investigations. At the beginning of December he called me and reported triumphantly that he had finally found out what had happened. My original system had disappeared without trace; another system of the same brand had

unfortunately been part of a truckload, which had been stolen. Sad to say, but this had been the last system of its kind in stock. He didn't know when and if there would be another shipment with this brand from abroad (and believe me, if a local expresses his doubts in this way then give up all hope. This is, after all, a country where the clear, simple sentence "I don't know" is hardly ever uttered, they rather tell you a confusing story). Roy was very understanding and said that he could offer me the following deal: I should go into the Paradisian branch and look for a system in approximately the same price range, he also told me the name of a brand he had in mind, and he would personally take care that I got it delivered before Christmas without any further formalities.

I wasn't ecstatic about the brand but I was utterly fed up with the whole mess and so I did as I was told. Of course I caused a major crisis in the Paradisian branch where they gasped and wrung their hands that a delivery before Christmas was totally out of the question and similar nonsense. Good old Roy, who was either fed up with me or completely exasperated, somehow managed to get my system delivered around the 20th of December and I could listen to the newly founded Paradisian radio station as well as to my many tapes and records which I hardly remembered any more. As I had already suspected, the system is a little sensitive and fragile and had to go to Larry, a returnee technician from England, several times already. He lived in a galvanized hut and bred dogs for the police force, but again I digress... as I was saying: the system is mainly working and anything else is too tiresome to mention.

My shopping spree had quite obviously lost its zest and I didn't think about technical items for a very long time. But the business got more and more successful over the years, in certain months there was hardly any free time left to cook meals and so my urge to purchase a freezer became overwhelming as I was thinking in terms of precooking, deep freezing portions and other time saving procedures. You may ask why we all don't simply go to a take-away or fast food restaurant? The choice is very limited: it's either junk food, fried and greasy, a Chinese restaurant or local kitchen (three or four shops) with the same dishes daily, year in year out. Believe me, you can only eat e.g. "Creole Chicken" so many times before you turn away screaming! A lot of people cook out of desperation and the lack in variety of restaurants. A freezer was very enticing and a friend of mine got so fed up of my prattling on and on about a damned freezer that she told me the flat next to hers, which she managed for the owners, was not occupied and would remain like that for quite some time because of renovations and there was an ancient empty freezer standing around belonging to the flat

which I could pick up and use until further notice. Once again I was a happy woman although the freezer was one of these boxes where you throw everything in from above and trouble if you are looking for something specific after!

I was impatient and couldn't wait for more help, so I raced to the flat with a Jeep and three of us (a neighbor included) dragged the box, which must have weighted a ton, into the Jeep where it overlapped by about 5 cm, so that one couldn't close the back door, how could it be otherwise. We invented some weird artistic constructions with several ropes and I drove slowly and carefully up the steep hill to my little house. There I yelled for my neighbor and a friend to drag the thing out and into my kitchen where later I was dementedly happy again. The happiness lasted for about 1.5 years then I had to give back the freezer as the flat it came from was rented out.

Unsuspectingly I went on a happy search for a brand new freezer, this time I had visions of an upright model with nice drawers to sort things in, a well-known, reliable brand at a reasonable price. Again, as it turned out, this was complicated. Most freezers exist in "chest form" (no way!) or, if it's an upright model they are outrageously expensive and so huge that one could easily stash a murder victim inside. After long and exhausting investigations I succeeded and found a lovely model of a well-known brand, the price was right, although the size I requested was not in stock (only a bonsai version and the murder design). No problem, the manager assured me, the item could be ordered and would be delivered in two weeks. The shop had an impeccable reputation for fast and reliable deliveries, so I agreed.

After two weeks I trotted by the shop without any big expectations and they told me the delivery was on the way. After two more weeks I got the same information.

In the following three months, whenever I was in town, I checked the shop automatically; it simply became part of daily routine like e.g. going to the gas station. After three months they had good news: my freezer had arrived!! Hurrah! But, alas, it had been damaged together with some other items and so they had to send it back to wherever it had come from. I seem to remember dimly that back home I again threw one of my famous wobblies. Of course, like so often, this incident took place before some of our guests arrived on the island with the well-known remark about Paradise in which I was lying around happily doing nothing.

At home I still had the borrowed freezer, filled to the brim with deep frozen meals but the arrival of the new tenants to the flat where the freezer belonged, had fortunately been delayed. After five months of listening to all kinds of "freezer stories" from people on whom I wanted to unburden my

frustration, it so happened that a little shop right next to my friend had to close down due to mismanagement and resulting debts. To keep the damage limited they had to sell everything as fast as possible, among others was an upright freezer in almost exactly the right size for me, one year old and hence a little cheaper than a brand new model. And NO, it is NOT so in Paradise that every used item automatically loses 50% of its value. You can run around and tell this tale but it won't help, nobody will drop the price. My friend like so many others was thoroughly fed up with MY freezer story, so she reacted instantly, reserved the thing for me and the next day we dragged it away, only about US\$ 50 cheaper than a new one, but finally A FREEZER! My originally ordered freezer from the shop never arrived up to this day or maybe it did? I never checked back again, which I had been doing for the past six months and was thoroughly fed up with. And, to tell you the truth, I don't WANT to know about it any more.

Finally I want to tell you another interesting story about a customer willing to buy something but not being allowed to do so. He went into a shop (the one with the Hoover bags!) to purchase a sound system. The desired model was exhibited in the window. The employee informed him: "This is the last model of its kind, we cannot sell that!" (the one in the shop window)

The customer asked: "And when will you get this model again?"

Answer: " We won't get any more."

"So why don't you sell me the one from the window, if you are not getting any more?"

"This is not possible!"

The customer, by now speechless due to the absurdity of the statement, went to the manager of the shop who told him exactly the same. You see, even if you are willing to pay instantly for something PS\$ 3000 or more in cash, this doesn't mean that you can purchase it, so there!

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