

The best essays from Thien's long-running  
gardening column in *The Business Times*



GARDENER'S  
LOG

**Thien**

Two-time winner of Singapore's  
Best Home Gardens award





A

GARDENER'S  
LOG

Written and  
photographed by  
**Thien**



AN EPIGRAM BOOK

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Written by Thien  
Photography by Thien

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For wifey,  
**Min**

# FOREWORD

Dr Chin See Chung  
Director, Singapore Botanic Gardens



Gardening is a deeply personal activity. Thien has sensitively captured his personal recollections, emotions and the trials and tribulations of gardening in this beautifully-presented collection of delightful essays. Some 40 years of concerted effort have transformed Singapore into a lush, clean and green city. In recent years, another transformation is taking place. The National Parks Board, responsible for providing and enhancing the greenery of Singapore, has bold plans for a gardening renaissance of the island city. It has set up a brand new arm to upgrade the horticultural industry including the quality of all garden workers.

Under the “Community in Bloom” programme, it has organised community gardening groups that now number over 150. Beyond the current central business district, three major gardens are being planned. And this year sees the staging of the inaugural Singapore Garden Festival with some of the best garden and floral designers in the world, participating. What more encouragement, opportunities and inspiration will gardeners and aspiring gardeners need?

This book complements the blooming of Singapore beautifully. These essays by Singapore’s foremost gardening writer are personal reflections that mark his life-long gardening journey. They provide a colourful quilt of impressions that traces the changes in the garden and plantscape of Singapore and beyond. Thien reminisces about the bygone times of his grandfather and wonders about the common plants that seems to have gone out of fashion. He takes us on intimate floral journeys through his garden with his brilliant descriptions of the plants and flowers, smells, animal life and changes. Occasionally the reader gets a special treat as Thien applies his keen powers of observation and creative pen on his gardening forays beyond Singapore.

Illustrated with charming photographs, the essays are also a commentary on the state of gardening in the country. It presents a level of sophistication not normally associated with gardens and gardening in Singapore. But then, Thien and “wifey” are both highly successful hobbyist gardeners and proud owners of a delightfully intimate award-winning home garden.

This collection is to be enjoyed in sips, perhaps best outdoors in a park or in a garden setting. Though not a “how-to” manual, it contains a lot of information and wisdom on a wide range of plants and gardening ideas. It is a book for everyone including those who are only arm-chair gardeners or those who would only want a good read. Like a beautiful plant group, Thien’s gardening column has a following of eager readers and admirers. This collection in one convenient attractive package will be eagerly received.

When he’s not gardening or thinking of the next exotic plant to add to his collection, Thien is Ronnie Lim, the Energy Editor of *The Business Times*, a leading financial daily published by Singapore Press Holdings.

# ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This is not a “how-to” book. Rather, it’s more of a “how-to enjoy your garden” leisurely read, preferably with a chilled glass of Chablis in hand. And that was how I sold the idea to my editors, and the premise on which I began writing Gardener’s Log for *The Business Times* some years back.

But not a single word would have been written if not for the initial encouragement and push which wifey provided. It wasn’t easy. The columns for Gardener’s Log were written in my own time, after my daily work for the newspaper was done. As I wrote bylined columns on bread-and-butter subjects like trade and industry, and energy, for the paper, I needed to make a distinction between those columns and Gardener’s Log, hence my Thien byline – derived from my middle Chinese name, meaning sky. Things were off to a sunny start, or so I had hoped for the column.

“I need a story line first for this particular plant,” I would often agonise, when wifey pushed me on the subject for my next column, well before I had finished what I was working on. But her persistence, and belief in me, I guess, helped.

Is the tone of the column light enough? Does it have any anecdotes, let alone amusing ones? These were among the many questions I often asked my editors-at-home, comprising wifey and daughters Min and Lyn. There was much reworking, for the better I think.

Then, pictures also needed to be taken. Flowers don’t wait: you have to catch them in the right light (I was always concerned about the rain), and before they wither, or get chewed up overnight by bugs. Some like the bloom of the *Keng Hwa* or *Epiphyllum oxypetalum*, which apart from making a late-night appearance, lasts only for a few hours.

Initially, wifey did help with some of the background work, but I eventually had to do this on my own, consoled somewhat by the fact that this wasn’t a how-to-garden column that would have required some really serious botanical research. (I must admit I have taken some botanical liberties with this book.)

Still, in the process, Gardener’s Log managed to win some fans, including a kindly neighbour who, among others, provided the encouragement for me to continue writing it.

The column has also helped win us many new friends in the gardening fraternity, from nursery owners and nursery hands to the folks at the Singapore Botanic Gardens, including its director Dr Chin See Chung and deputy director Dr Wong Wei Har, and John Tan, president of the Singapore Gardening Society and Victor Lee, secretary of the Gardening Society, in whose newsletter Gardener’s Log also appears. Both wifey and I treasure their friendship and support, and practical advice in gardening.

We also had the pleasure of meeting Dr Henry Oakeley, chairman of the Royal Horticultural Society Orchid Committee and president of the Orchid Society of Great Britain who, apart from taking us on a pleasurable tour of Wisley Garden in the United Kingdom recently, also made the time to proofread the essays in the book.

*A Gardener’s Log*, in that respect, is a record of how our garden has grown, just as we have grown as gardeners.

Gardening is a daily challenge: the lawn needs watering, fallen leaves need to be swept, overgrown plants need trimming, fertilisers need to be applied, and insecticide sprayed, and so on. Here, our resident gardener Jay’s help has been invaluable.

Getting the columns of Gardener’s Log published into a book was even more challenging. After knocking on many doors, they remain shut. Edmund Wee of Epigram was the only brave and kind soul willing to put *A Gardener’s Log* to print. I’m grateful to him.

I think it’s time for another glass of Chablis.

Thien  
December 2006

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PLANTS  
MY GRAND-DAD  
TAUGHT ME



## IN SEARCH OF OUR PARENTS' GARDENS

Where have all the flowers of old Singapore gone? Gone, one would imagine, with the old folks and homes. Like hunting for antiques, some of the more interesting plant finds are to be found in whatever old gardens that still remain today. That's how I was reunited with the beautiful *Gloriosa superba*, salvaging a couple of tubers from a Lloyd Road terrace which was awaiting the wrecker's ball.

"That's the creeper that flourished in the bushes in my grandfather's Buckley Road garden" I told my wife. And now, after a 30-year separation, its red-and-yellow lantern-like flowers are back home with me again.

Each flower has six crinkled petals, about 6.5 centimetres long and 1.2 centimetres wide. It is green when it first opens, but matures into a yellow, red-tipped beauty. The plant likes the wet, rainy season, so in today's heat, it needs regular watering to flower. (An interesting aside is that the leaves are apparently used as a traditional medicine to kill head-lice.)

To me, the *Gloriosa superba* or climbing lily symbolises one of the fast vanishing plants in high-rise Singapore. Over the last few years, I have only chanced upon it in a few homes. Apart from the shift to high-rise blocks, another reason, I suspect, for the plant's demise is that fastidious Singaporeans may not accept a creeper which grows in a fairly unruly fashion.

In our garden, for instance, our *Gloriosa* literally tries to reach for the skies, entangling itself among the trees beyond our fence, and has to be pruned back regularly. But it is worth the effort to see those "dancing lanterns" again, and in knowing that in our own little way, we are helping to preserve the country's old flora.

Singapore is not unique in this. The results of a recent global report on plant diversity – the first such international survey, carried out over a 20-year period – are alarming. One in eight known plant species is threatened with extinction, the report on threatened plants said.

Habitat destruction and introduction of non-native species have caused about 34,000 species to become so rare they could easily disappear. And these refer not to exotics but even to common everyday plants like 29 per cent of today's palms, 32 per cent of lilies and irises, and 14 per cent of roses, which could vanish tomorrow.

To relate to the report, all Singaporeans need to do is to try to recall the flowers and plants of their childhood, some of which may no longer be around.

I remember some of these: like the cow pea vine (*Vigna unguiculata*) with its purplish-blue flowers, from which my old Cantonese servant used to squeeze the blue pigment to coat the nonya *bak chang* or sweetmeat rice dumplings which she made. Apart from some older private homes, the cow pea – a slender climber which can grow to about three metres high can still be found in some commercial nurseries here.

Those were the days of "practical" plants or flowers, like the rojak flower or large torch ginger (*kantan*), a native of Indonesia and Malaysia, from which we eagerly waited for the pink, spear-tipped flower bud to emerge, so we could exchange it with the roving hawker for free packets of *rojak* (a local prawn-paste flavoured salad).

There were also the old fruit trees in my grandfather's garden, from the usual rambutan, mango, jackfruit and starfruit to unusual ones like figs and breadfruit. The latter, I learnt from our old gardener, can provide a substantial meal for the table.

Our old Malay *kebun* taught us how: slice up the large jackfruit-size fruits, coat the slices with batter, and then deep-fry them (like preparing banana fritters). We then dipped the still quite bland-tasting breadfruit slices into melted *gula melaka* (brown sugar) for a delicious snack.

There were also other plants – less practical and even fun ones – like the blue morning glory flowers, to which we woke up, or the *keng hwa* cactus, for which we stayed up till midnight to watch



The Climbing Lily is among the plants that are in danger of vanishing.

**HABITAT DESTRUCTION AND INTRODUCTION OF NON-NATIVE SPECIES HAVE CAUSED ABOUT 34,000 SPECIES TO BECOME SO RARE THEY COULD EASILY DISAPPEAR. AND THESE REFER NOT TO EXOTICS BUT EVEN TO COMMON EVERYDAY PLANTS...**

the short-lived but gorgeous white blooms (they last just from around 9 p.m. to dawn). Then there were the cherry trees from which we picked the unripe berries as ammunition for our home-made, rubber-band guns.

Sadly, some of these familiar childhood friends are in danger of vanishing; others I still happily stumble upon sometimes, thanks to the efforts of places like the Singapore Botanic Gardens which has, for

instance, planted breadfruit trees at the garden's new annexe near the National University of Singapore's Bukit Timah campus.

Today, even as my wife and I collect new exotics and hybrids from different worlds, we still keep an eye out for old, soon-to-vanish Singapore plants, so that when we tell our children about our growing up years, we can illustrate these stories with still-flourishing specimens from the gardens of our past.

## FLOWERS THAT SAY HELLO AND GOODBYE

**F**rangipani evoke strong emotions – from their use in wreaths and cemeteries to Hawaiian leis or garlands, people have either feared or been charmed by this tree with its beautiful flowers.

We started our frangipani collection not long after they shed their taboo image here, but sometime before they became a fashionable tree, increasingly used in lush, Balinese-type landscapes.

When we went hunting for our first plant some 16 years or so ago, my wife and I asked Ruku, the salesperson at the former government nursery in Ang Mo Kio, to find us “anything but a white flowering plant”. Ruku agreed wholeheartedly with our choice, coaching us on how to avoid the earlier, original white flowering variety (*Plumeria obtusa*), which has larger white flowers and blunt-ended leaves.

Said to have its origin in the West Indies, this is the variety which most Singaporeans have long associated with graveyards. Ruku wasn't the only apprehensive one. Our neighbour was also baffled, shaking his head with some concern when he learnt we were planting a frangipani tree outside our gate.

This is probably due to the mystical stigma attached to frangipanis – they produce fragrant flowers in abundance which are used as offerings in both Buddhist and Hindu ceremonies, and the tree is often planted in Muslim cemeteries in Malaysia and Indonesia.

Our interest at that time, however, had been fired by the beautiful hybrid frangipani varieties of *Plumeria rubra* – with pointed leaves – which the Parks and Recreation folks had introduced.

These sprouted bunches and bunches of drooping raspberry reds and “hot” pinks, and were first seen around the former Raffles Institution at Grange Road, at Dhoby Ghaut, and near the former Orchard Theatre. *Plumeria rubra* apparently had their roots, pardon the pun, in Central America.

My first happy association with frangipanis came way before that, when I was at Hawaii's East West Center in Oahu. I remember seeing students from the adjoining University of Hawaii happily stringing frangipani flowers into leis for friends. Since then, my wife and I have collected frangipanis of mango, yellow and pinks of various shades.

Our yellow plant outside our gate is our pride and joy. I had propagated it from the mother plant we bought for \$120 from a nursery in Bukit Panjang years ago, but which flowered infrequently as it was in a rather shaded spot.

From a puny one-metre sapling, the tree, now four metres tall, sprouts bunches of long-petalled yellow flowers and never fails to draw admirers.

What we have found so attractive about the frangipani is that it is one of the easiest trees to manage, and to merge into our gardenscape.

It is easily propagated by branch cuttings. But first, allow the sap to drain from the cutting before potting, and use well-drained soil. It must not be kept too wet before roots have formed. Once new leaves appear, replacing the old ones, you know you are safely home.

The frangipani will flower all year round in a sunny spot and can grow up to 10 metres tall. But it is easy to manage, as the soft branches can be trimmed for a better-shaped tree. And don't be alarmed if the trees shed practically all their leaves – that happens once a year during their dormant period.

Today, my wife and I are picking up where we left off. We are now on the lookout for white frangipani or white *Plumeria rubra* to round off our collection. But just after we managed to pick up one with a soft pink-tinged centre, my wife called me excitedly from the Singapore Botanic Gardens to say she had spotted a gorgeous, new white hybrid, the ‘Bridal White’.

I guess some attractions never end.



Frangipani is often associated with graveyards but the Hawaiians weave them into garlands for friends.

## SHADES OF THE SHOE BLACK FLOWER

The hibiscus, for me, always brings flashbacks of Hawaii – yes, including the flowers tucked behind the ears of the beautiful wahines. There were also the walks through the University of Hawaii grounds on my way downtown, with the stroll made pleasurable by the endless, distracting hedges bursting with gorgeous, huge *Hibiscus* blooms (it must be the effect of all those azure blue skies) – from whites, yellows and oranges to bright pinks, flaming reds and mauve-purple.

That was in the late-70s, when the only hibiscus I recall seeing lots of in Singapore was a relatively puny, red variety, memorable only because it was so common.

Today, the “Hibiscus-cape” here has changed considerably, thanks to the many imported hybrids, from shorter-stem versions brought in from Holland to others like the double-petalled varieties including those from neighbouring Malaysia and Thailand.

(One expensive lesson we have gained is that varieties imported from cooler climes don't do as well here and need careful acclimatisation. And if they do take off, these are usually not as prolific. The outcome was that an expensive hedge of Dutch hibiscus in our garden came to nought.)

Our interest in hibiscus was rekindled during a trip to Bangkok's wet market of Chathuchak a couple of years back, where “wifey” went berserk and would have bought up the whole market if possible. (Our hotel room, I might add, was transformed overnight into a floral suite, and no kidding, the hotel manager even threatened to throw the plants out).

But we persisted, and today, are enjoying these beautiful Thai-cultivated hibiscus plants, with the flowers ranging from white/with maroon centre, burnt orange-red, and sunburst yellow to an old fashioned purplish-mauve, all of which have become the envy of the neighbours.

Today there are few tropical gardens – except surprisingly in Singapore – which do not have at least one hibiscus plant, including the most common hibiscus *rosa-sinensis* to the showy hybrids that are continually being developed, including in Hawaii and Florida.

The flowers range in size from small to enormous (some reportedly as much as 20 – 30 centimetres in diameter), with varieties which have variegated foliage of green, white and pink, which makes this variety an attractive hedge plant.

The attraction of the hibiscus is that, despite the flowers lasting only a day, there are enough blooms opening at different times to provide a continuous show.

It's no wonder therefore that the hibiscus has been adopted as the national flower by both Hawaii, the Sunshine State, and also neighbouring Malaysia (where it is known as the *bunga raya*). In Indonesia, it is considered a sacred flower and is used in offerings.

An interesting aside is that the hibiscus was also known as the “shoe black flower”, referring to the fact that at one time, juice extracted from the petals was used to darken shoes in countries like India and Indonesia. In China, it was apparently also used by women to dye their hair and eyebrows.

Both leaves and flowers are also edible and sometimes used in traditional medicine. For instance, Hawaiians were said to have eaten raw flowers to aid digestion, while the Chinese pickled and ate them.

While it is comforting to know that we have such practical plants in our midst, the hibiscus, for us, adds vibrant tropical colour to our garden when in bloom, which is practically all-year round.

That's when we get to enjoy the yellow ‘Jerry Smith’, the apricot ‘Topsy’, the flaming orange-red ‘Orange Pride’, the fragile white-maroon ‘Madonna’ and the old-fashioned ruffled, mauve-purple ‘Linda



Nowadays, hibiscus flowers are not confined to the puny red variety but come in a variety of colours from white to mauve-purple.

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Pearl’ – at least that's what we think we have identified from the book *Growing Hibiscus* by Les Beers & Jim Howie (Kangaroo Press).

This useful book – which lists all the how-tos from care of plant to propagation – states that because of the proliferation of *Hibiscus* hybrids, to list

all of them with descriptions would “require a book similar in length to an encyclopaedia”.

It adds that it is difficult to estimate the number of varieties existing today, given that in Hawaii alone in the 1920s, there were already over 3,000 named varieties.

The proliferation of hibiscus there probably explains the habit local beauties have of tucking the blooms behind their ears. Apart from being an adornment, it has a practical purpose too.

For instance, the next time you spot a wahine with a hibiscus bloom worn over the right ear, you're in luck, it means she is eligible. Don't get fresh, though, with the one wearing it over the left ear; she's taken.

## LEGACY IN OUR MIDST

**W**e have a tree in our garden that cannot ever be cut down. If this sounds like the beginning of a gripping fairy tale, it's true. Like it or not, we cannot ever remove it... without the authorities' permission.

You see, like a conservation property some people inherit, we had unwittingly planted, some 10 years ago, a protected tree of sorts. And it's a bit scary to realise that we have something akin to America's giant Redwood growing in our garden.

"We had to trim the one in the Hong Kong Bank house recently because it was slanting. Good thing your's growing straight upwards," Musa, a professional tree-cutter, told us recently when he saw our tembusu, now about 10 metres tall.

"It's a protected species which you cannot cut down without permission," he says, confirming what some Gardening Society friends told us earlier. This is because there apparently aren't that many left.

Well, while it's a *fait accompli*, it's nice to know, in a sense, that we are also doing our bit to help preserve an endangered native species.

The tembusu, or *Fagraea fragrans*, so called because of its sweet-scented flowers, is a giant which can grow to about 40 metres high.

It was commonly planted in the earlier years of the last century, especially around Tanglin district, according to *A Guide to the Wayside Trees of Singapore*. But it is too large for today's generally small gardens.

When wifey first planted it from a seedling that sprouted out of nowhere in the garden, we didn't realise what it was until it had grown into a treelet. That's when it struck us that we had inherited a tembusu. But despite some initial wariness on my part, I was persuaded, perhaps by nostalgia, to let it stay.

The tembusu, you see, is a hardwood, and when we were kids, my cousins and I used to make the best

and strongest catapults, shaping these painstakingly with penknives and sandpaper, from the "Y"s of the branches of the tree in my grand-dad's garden.

Today, however, reality, and less of nostalgia, kicks in, whenever I struggle with my handsaw to lop off some of its lower branches. Unlike say, the frangipani, the tembusu, I say without exaggeration, is a 100 times tougher to saw through.

But it is an impressive tree, with its handsome, dark, deeply-fissured trunk topped by a crown of simple, elliptical leaves.

The tembusu tree flowers twice a year around May and October, and produces large branches of fragrant creamy white flowers which attract lots of bees and birds by day, and moths and bats by night.

Recently, a family of squirrels has taken to scampering through its branches, and even resting on its upper nooks. One chanced on a bonanza the other day, when it sniffed out a freshly-abandoned honeycomb and chomped on what I imagine must have been a waffle-like feast, leaving just some waxy strips dangling from the branches.

The squirrels reminded me of a pair of squawking white parrots we saw some time back, nesting high up in a majestic, perhaps century-old tembusu at the Botanics, safe from predators far below. But it will be many, many more decades before ours will ever reach that height, as it is a slow-growing tree.

Nevertheless, the top of our tembusu tree is now neck-and-neck with the catechu or betel nut palm, the tallest plant we currently have in our garden, and soon it will even overtake our neighbour's 20-year-old durian tree.

I've often wondered what it will be like to carve our initials on its trunk, so that years later, our children will be pleasantly surprised should they chance upon them. But I realise there really is no need to, as the tembusu tree itself will be our legacy to them, as much as it is to the garden.



Standing tall: The century-old tembusu in Singapore Botanic Gardens; the tree, which can also be found in Fort Canning Park, has sweet-smelling flowers which attract bees and birds alike. The protected tembusu is not just home to squirrels, bees and birds in Thien's garden; the majestic tree will also be his children's inheritance in time to come.

## A PLANT FOR ALL REASONS

**C**ocoa Delight', 'Ice Blue' and 'Ice Green' sound like great ice-cream flavours. But don't be fooled, they are in fact just cool names for new, hot ginger varieties.

Ginger, for me, evokes spicy (burning) memories. I remember, for instance, getting "hot lips" from eating too much reddish, candied ginger (rhizomes of the *Zingiber officinale*, or true ginger) sold by the candyman on his cycle-cart. Incidentally, this ginger is also known in Malay as halia, as in *teh halia* or ginger tea sold at the *sarabat* stall.

And then there was the ginger in *rojak*, which set our stomachs afire. My cousins and I used to run to a patch of Torch Ginger or *Etilingera elatior* (also known as *Bunga Kantan*) in our grand-dad's garden to see if there were any new flower buds to barter with the *rojak* man for handouts.

It was, in retrospect, an uneven exchange, as the aromatic *Bunga Kantan*, diced finely and sprinkled sparingly on the tossed salad, made it special.

Today, *Bunga Kantan* is still used in (the better) *rojaks*, and also as a condiment in preparing other Peranakan dishes including hot and sour Penang Laksa. That's why ginger, especially the *Kantan*, is a must-have for anyone who wants to grow a Peranakan spice and fruit garden.

A colleague of mine has different must-have ideas about ginger. Every week, without fail, she brings in a bouquet of freshly-cut *Alpinia purpu-*

...GINGER, FOR ME, EVOKES SPICY (BURNING) MEMORIES. I REMEMBER, FOR INSTANCE, GETTING "HOT LIPS" FROM EATING TOO MUCH REDDISH, CANDIED GINGER (RHIZOMES OF THE ZINGIBER OFFICINALE, OR TRUE GINGER) SOLD BY THE CANDYMAN ON HIS CYCLE-CART.

*rata* to brighten up her desk. It's better value, and lasts longer, than roses, she says.

Ginger, in that sense, is a plant for all reasons.

It is a highly diverse plant group with both ornamental and commercial value (from making ginger biscuits and ginger beer to medicines). But ginger is still a relative newcomer as a landscape plant and as an ornamental.

We ourselves have three established stands of pink Torch Gingers (so-called because the flower looks like a flaming Olympic torch when in full bloom) in our back garden.

The majestic Torch Ginger is useful for screening as the tall, leafy stalks reach up to three or four metres in height, and it also provides us with an unending supply of flowers, which we find too beautiful to cut for the table. (Besides, there are no longer any *rojak* hawkers plying the streets these days.)

We also have a red Torch plant (which has distinctive red leaf stalks) which we obtained from Mandai Garden, but it has yet to flower.

My sister in Brisbane, who has a spectacular stand of yellow ginger (*Zingiber spectabile*) just outside her dining room, recently brought a plant over for us, adding to the new, dark brown Australian *Zingiber* variety, 'Cocoa Delight', and the Blue Ginger (*Dichorisandra thysiflora*) which she had sent us earlier.

They are all just settling in our garden, and we look forward to seeing their flower bracts soon.

The *Zingiber* has brightly-coloured, erect and stout, cylindrical inflorescence bracts, and there is nothing more impressive than a stand of these flower cones. The name *Zingiber* apparently is Sanskrit for a bull's horn (just so you get the idea!).

Just like the *Alpinia purpurata* favoured by my colleague, the flowers of the *Zingiber* and the Torch Ginger are gaining in popularity as exotic cut flowers in Australia.

We also grow the *Alpinia*, which produces throughout the year showy spikes of small white flowers amid vivid scarlet bracts. There is also a pink flowering variety and both can be used as hedge plants.

But we have not had much luck so far with the so-called Ice ginger, which is a new variety of the *Curcuma domestica*, or the tumeric (also known as *Kunyit* in Malay), one of the oldest known spice plants. I remember *Kunyit* – a spice which leaves yellow stains on the fingers – as a favourite in the kitchen as my mom often used it in making curries.

In that sense, gingers, in my mind, have come full circle, from being just associated with food in my childhood days to being sought after for their flowers and as ornamental plants in gardens today. They make gingers that much more meaningful for me to grow.



Cook's favourite: The bud of the Torch Ginger, or *Bunga Kantan*, is used to spice up dishes like *rojak* and laksa.

### GINGER TIDBITS

#### Siting

Plant tall, leafy ginger species like the Torch Ginger (*Etilingera elatior*) or *Zingiber spectabile* at the sides or the back of the garden. They become effective screens, and will not take up too much of the garden space that way. They can tolerate full sun. Use smaller gingers like the *Alpinia purpurata* in a clump, to form a flower patch or hedge. They do better in light shade.

#### Planting

Gingers are easily propagated from rhizomes. You can lop off the upper portion of the leaf stems, leaving just enough with the rhizomes, which should then

be planted quickly. (This method of propagation enables one to bring in taller gingers from overseas quite easily.) There are about 1,200 species in all, with about 1,000 available in tropical Asia alone.

#### Care

All gingers grow best in damp, humid and shady conditions. In fact, in their natural habitat, many of the medium to tall species grow beside small forest streams. In the home garden, they grow best in well-drained soil. Gingers are also generally pest-free and easy to grow.

## CRY ME A RIVER

The first “weepy” I ever set eyes on was a blue willow. This was when I was still in school and my interest in trees then was focused on just three things: Whether they bore fruits, made good catapults, or if they were suitable for climbing.

The willow was part of my grand-dad’s china-ware and now, many years later, I can still visualise the stylised willow tree next to a river in the back-drop, setting the scene for the bitter-sweet tale of a pair of lovers whom the gods save from an unhappy end by turning into swallows. Imagine this intriguing tale on a simple Blue-and-White plate.

Today, I see these same “weepies” every morning when I walk my dogs along the Sungei Ulu Pandan, where weeping willows or *Salix babylonica* line a stretch of the river bank.

The Weeping Willow got its name from the tree’s drooping branches and leaves, which have been likened to a cascade of tears. And while not such a familiar sight here, willows are apparently grown in graveyards elsewhere, with their branches providing shade to the graves below.

They are also usually grown next to rivers and ponds, lending further to the illusion of a tree shedding a stream of tears. But this is for good reason: they are a natural water-loving species, and their wide-spreading roots help control soil erosion along the river bank.

My wife and I have always loved “weepies” for their willowy form. They evoke serenity.

But while it was a case of unrequited love with our first weepy, the *Salix babylonica* (which probably found our hillside garden a tad too dry), we’ve been more successful with another less common weeping tree, the *Ficus longiflora*.

We first spotted it as a sole metre-tall sapling in a local nursery, and had to persuade the nursery owner to sell it to us. Even at that stage, when neither the nursery man nor we knew what it was, the

*F. longiflora* showed promise as a “weepy” with its hang-down branches and drooping leaves.

But we had to be extra patient with this plant – as it went through an interminably long dormancy of well over a year – before it started to grow. It must have responded to our threats to cut it down (my wife is a firm practitioner of “plant slow-talk”), as we were planning a timber deck in that area.

As it turned out, the *F. longiflora* today occupies prime spot in that garden area, as we got the carpenters to grudgingly build the deck around it instead. They just couldn’t understand why we were prepared to spoil the lines of the deck just for a treelet.

So far, in Singapore, we’ve only spotted a couple of full-grown *F. longifloras* (about 10 metres tall) in the Singapore Botanic Gardens, which means it will easily take another 10 years or so before ours can reach that height, given its slow growth. But we don’t mind this at all.

Our other “weepy”, the Tea Tree or *Leptospermum brachyandrum*, from the Myrtaceae family, which we sourced from Brisbane, also seems to be a slow-grower, and we are beginning to wonder whether this is a characteristic of most weepy plants.

The Tea Tree, interestingly, apparently got its name from the practice of early Aussie settlers dunking the leaves of an aromatic species of the *Leptospermum* into hot water to get a tea substitute.

Today, the *Leptospermum*, a small treelet which can reach up to four metres, is grown more for its attractive weeping habit as well as its pretty trunk, as the tree’s flaky bark displays grey and soft pink colours. It also produces small white flowers, which is a common characteristic of most weeping trees.

To speed the growth of our Tea Tree sapling, my sister from Ozland suggested that we trim it, which we’ve so far done once. While it has grown about one-metre tall, the trunk is still puny and pencil-thin at this stage.



Cascade of tears? A stand of weeping willows or *Salix babylonica* line the banks of the Sungei Ulu Pandan where I walk my dogs. These trees are a natural water-loving species, and their wide-spreading roots help control soil erosion along the river bank.

**THEY ARE ALSO USUALLY GROWN NEXT TO RIVERS AND PONDS, LENDING FURTHER TO THE ILLUSION OF A TREE SHEDDING A STREAM OF TEARS.**

Tea Trees, from various Aussie accounts, are suitable for poorly drained areas, tropical areas and can stand moist and shaded areas. This suggests that they are also thirsty plants which need lots

of water, or a nearby water source, like a river, to quench their thirst.

That’s probably one reason why the folks from National Parks Board recently planted a row of Tea Tree saplings near the Ulu Pandan river as well.

Notwithstanding a neighbour’s rather unflattering comments about the Sungei Ulu Pandan being just a glorified canal, the growing of “weepies” like the Weeping Willow and the Tea Tree along its banks can only enhance its stature as a natural river.





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