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How Penang Botanic Gardens took root

By [ALAM TEAH LEAM SENG](#) - September 30, 2019 @ 12:41pm



A 1910 picture-postcard view of the Penang Botanic Gardens entrance. NSTP/ALAN TEH LEAM SENG

‘THE Penang Botanic Gardens will be the first of its kind to be inscribed as a Unesco World Heritage Site,’ a friend declares during our monthly get-together with former schoolmates.

‘I beg to differ,’ someone retorts.

As all eyes fall on him, the Johorean, who found permanent home here in Alor Star after his father was promoted in 1983 and moved the family up north, said: ‘There are already three on the list. Surely, Penang cannot be first, can it?’

The question draws an instant rebuttal from the topic initiator.

‘Although the Royal Kew Gardens in the United Kingdom, the Rio de Janeiro Botanical Gardens in Brazil and the Singapore Botanic Gardens are inscribed on the Unesco World Heritage list, they are all man-made. The one we have in Penang will gain pride of place as the first natural botanic garden through its inclusion,’ he says, while glancing at his handwritten notes whipped out from his shirt pocket.

Over the next hour or so, the rest of us are taken on a journey through time, learning stories behind the place known more commonly by its two other names - Waterfall Gardens and Taman Kebun Bunga.

The former was derived from a cascading waterfall in the vicinity that is

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'They held hands before being swept away by the waves'

Between 1878 and 1884, he searched for specimens in Mauritius, Madagascar, Sumatra, the Moluccas (now Maluku Islands) and Borneo.

Under Curtis, three Experimental Gardens were established, including the Waterfall Nursery Gardens that became the present Botanic Gardens, the Top Hill Nursery, later renamed the Government Bungalow Garden, and the Plains Nursery, which later comprised the Government Residency.

Despite having to divide his time between the three places, as well as the surrounding forest reserve that was also placed under his charge, Curtis had an interest and passion for the Waterfall Gardens.

This was reflected in the 1887 budget where the Waterfall Gardens was allocated six times the amount set aside for the Government Bungalow Garden and the Plains Nursery combined!

THE GARDENS TAKE SHAPE

Part of the landholding for the Gardens was formerly owned by a person whom history remembers only as Hogan.

Inspired by the two earlier Gardens, Hogan attempted to grow nutmeg and cloves but progress was impeded when his employees were struck down by malaria.

It was likely that Curtis succumbed to the disease as well given his ill-health in the later years of managing the Gardens.

During the early days, Curtis filled his time with the construction of road circuits, erection of plant houses and provision of recreational venues.

In 1886, he replaced the old wooden bridge across the Waterfall River with three footbridges at locations presently occupied by or near the Lower and Middle bridges. A new pathway added is part of the walking and jeep route to the waterfall today.

A swampy area that had been drained and carved into an irregular-shaped pond was widened and deepened in 1894 with the construction of a stone-work dam wall.

Three young *Victoria regia* seedlings planted in June grew and covered the pond by September.

The gigantic lily species named in honour of Queen Victoria and native to the shallow waters of the Amazon River basin was renamed *Victoria amazonica* by the scientific community to better reflect upon its place of origin.

INDIAN AND CHINESE NEIGHBOURS

By the 20th century, additional land, adjacent to the Nattukkottai Chettiar Temple, was cleared to make way for the expanding Gardens and propagation of shrubs and shade trees.

Known also as Chitty Temple, the Indian place of worship on Waterfall Road was erected on land purchased in 1854 by the Penang Chettiar community to build a chettinar dedicated to the deity Thendayuthapani, who is believed to be an incarnation of Lord Murugan. The temple was consecrated in 1857.

Close to the road that leads to the entrance of the Penang Botanic Gardens, now known as Jalan Kebun Bunga, was the 19th-century mansion belonging to Cheah Chen Eok, the Penang tycoon best remembered for building the Queen Victoria Memorial Clock Tower at the Esplanade to commemorate the British monarch's Diamond Jubilee in 1897.

Today, the only reminder left of this stately home is the Moon Gate entrance, which is used as a meeting point for hikers going up Penang Hill.

In addition to his design and supervisory roles, Curtis remained as keen a plant collector as he was during his earlier years working in Chelsea.

Apart from turning the Gardens into a plant and seed repository, he assembled a remarkable collection in the Gardens' herbarium, which was later used as part of published surveys of Malayan flora.

Vegetables were of special interest to Curtis, who brought in 150 packets of European vegetable seeds from England, which germinated successfully and were distributed to farmers in George Town.

His efforts to source suitable seeds from India led to a plentiful supply of greens for the whole of Penang.

The mere mention of Curtis distributing tree saplings sourced from the nearby forest reserve for road-side planting throughout Penang, Province Wellesley (now Seberang Prai) and Perak gets us excited.

'Surely there were some Merbau plants as well,' someone says, and our conversation skews towards the recent announcement declaring the species as our national tree.

Attention soon reverts to the Penang Botanic Gardens and our narrator friend, after taking a brief look at his notes, picks up the story from where he left off.

He tells us Curtis received a large shipment of plants from the Calcutta and Hong Kong Botanic Gardens in 1889 which were sold to the public for \$75.35.



Charles Curtis was responsible for developing the Penang Botanic Gardens.

That same year, Curtis mounted expeditions to Larut Hills near Taiping, as well as Langkawi Islands, to collect specimens for his herbarium and sent duplicates to the Singapore Botanic Gardens and Kew Gardens, as well as exchange the extras for South American and African orchids.

Thanks to his tireless efforts, the herbarium collection surpassed the 3,000-specimen mark in 1890.

After several bouts of fever, Curtis went back to England in 1890 to recuperate and brought with him three hundred plants that took 15 cases to fill.

Throughout the voyage, he opened cases and watered them at intervals.

The losses suffered during the trip were inconsiderable and due to a few extremely cold nights before reaching the Straits of Gibraltar.

On route to England, Curtis spent time with the State Gardens superintendent in Gwalior, India, and acquired vegetable seeds that were despatched to Penang before he resumed sailing westwards to England.

Returning to Penang in 1892 fully recovered, he embarked on a project to plant nutmeg, clove, durian, banana, betel nut and other interesting and famous Penang trees in a location to allow visitors to see everything within a short period of time and return well ahead of their scheduled steamer departure.

Four years later, he began planting rubber trees at the Penang Botanic Gardens on the insistence of Henry Nicholas Ridley, director of the Singapore Botanic Gardens, who pioneered its development in Malaya and the region.

Unfortunately, the rubber yield in Penang was inferior to those tapped from the Singapore trees.

In 1897, he experimented with much success on Borneo sugar cane, but was forced to donate the specimens to the Caledonia and Prye Sugar Estates due to space constraint.



LOCAL BOTANIST

Throughout his tenure at the Penang Botanic Gardens, Curtis faced a recurrent problem of finding qualified staff.

Only a handful were capable enough to fulfil his expectations. Among those who made the mark was Mohammed Haniff, who was employed as an apprentice in 1890.

Through hard work and determination, the Penangite was promoted to overseer in 1893 and became field assistant in 1917.

He accompanied Curtis on expeditions to Kedah, Perak, Pahang, Johor, Kelantan and even southern Thailand.

After a brief appointment as assistant curator at the Singapore Botanic Gardens, Mohammed retired in 1926.

Instead of taking a well-earned rest, he put his knowledge to good use by publishing papers in the Gardens’ Bulletin of the Straits Settlements.

He co-authored Malay Village Medicine (1930) and contributed to the Dictionary of the Economic Products of the Malay Peninsula (1935).

His contributions have not been forgotten.

In 2001, the Mohammed Haniff Research and Development Trust Fund was established to support botanical training and research in Penang.

As our friend’s narration draws to a close, we are left with gaping mouths and sheer astonishment.

We have been to the Penang Botanic Gardens many times in the past but it has never occurred to us that there are so many stories related to it.

Before bidding each other farewell, we express optimism that with such a rich and illustrious past, the Penang Botanic Gardens will, without a doubt, be successful in its quest to gain inclusion into the Unesco World Heritage Site list.

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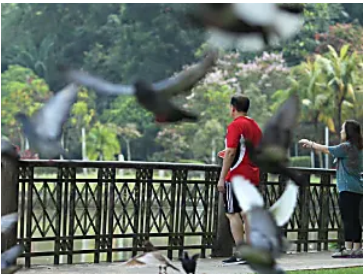
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