



# Gutta percha, the untold story

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April 10 2018 (Thursday) – The Forest Research Institute



Malaysia (FRIM)'s history is closely linked to a unique tree species called gutta percha or nyatoh taban merah tree which was once very valuable to the British Government. The high demand and extreme exploitation of this tree forced the British Government to initiate forest management and forestry research in British Malaya at the end of the 19th century, which evolved and eventually resulted in the establishment of FRIM in 1985.



Leafy shoots of gutta percha.

Latex of the species was highly sought-after to be used as the insulating material for submarine cables during the rapid development of international telecommunications in the mid

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for ensuring the sustainable use of natural resources for the conservation of our country's forests. In this aspect, FRIM has always been working to assist the industries in developing sustainable methods of production and promoting products development using alternative sources of raw materials."



Abd Latif observing the growth of a gutta percha tree in the FRIM campus.



Forest management was under the charge of Land Officers in 1895-1901 in the administration of the Federated Malay States. However, since 1901 the Chief Forest Officers were appointed in Perak, Selangor and Negeri Sembilan for forest administration. The first Forest Department was established in Johor in 1920, followed by Kedah (1923), Kelantan and Brunei (1933) as well as Terengganu (1936) to act as the 'Malayan Forest Service'. This was the starting point of forest management until the establishment of Forest Research Institute (FRI) as a research arm for Forestry Department in 1929 and FRIM as a statutory body in 1985.

The name 'gutta' means 'getah' in Malay language means latex/ gum; while 'percha' is the local name of the tree. The gutta percha or nyatoh taban merah (Palaquium gutta) from the Sapotaceae family is a medium-size timber tree which can reach the height of 35 m. This species is found in lowland forests in Peninsular Malaysia, Singapore, Sumatra and Borneo.

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cable insulation (left) and interior decorative items (right) (pix source: <http://atlantic-cable.com/>).

panel. Its leaves are yellowish-green or rusty

green with copper-coloured veins and the flowers are small.

The tree begins producing white rubber after 15 years' old. At room temperature, gutta percha latex is hard but when heated, it can be moulded into various shapes. Gutta percha was first introduced in Europe and marketed after it was

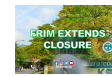


known to have the appropriate properties (flexible, able to withstand high pressure and cold temperature) for coating marine electric cables. In addition, the latex is also used as a golf ball coating, in dental treatment as well as for the making of pistol grip and jewelry.



The oldest gutta percha trees in the FRIM main campus were planted in 1927. The trees are about 27-32 m in height and their diameter at breast height (dbh) measure 33-46 cm.

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