

Rainforest, stream, wetland in a school

Cicadas chirp and doves nest in the “rainforest” at Commonwealth Secondary School.

Vegetation grows similarly to a rainforest, with an emergent layer of trees towering over a denser canopy, followed by an understorey of smaller plants closer to the ground.

On occasion, storms lead to flooding and a stream forms, as wide as the path through the trees. “The space is meant to mimic a rainforest. Environmental education has always been a strong programme in our school,” says humanities teacher Lye Zhen Xi, who is in charge of green programmes like the Eco Club co-curricular activity (CCA) for students.

The Rainforest was the first of seven eco-habitats created since 2012 at Commonwealth Secondary School, says Ms Lye, 33. Other green spaces dotted around the school in West Coast Road also fall under N’Parks’ Community in Bloom gardening programme.

These include a wetland converted from a concrete pond and a stream, which circulates with the help of a pump. Pink-necked green pigeons have nested in the area.

The Rainforest and Wetland were designed with rainwater harvesting systems, and there is even a saltwater aquarium.

Commonwealth Secondary School also has an indoor farm, where students harvest vegetables grown through hydroponics for the canteen.

While external vendors prune trees and do heavy-duty maintenance jobs, the 30 Eco Club members take on tasks like watering plants and asking leaves to make moisture-complaint, much rings around saplings, which help them grow better. The members, who meet twice a week, also remove golden apple snails – an invasive species – and their distinctive pink eggs, when they make an appearance in the Stream.

School leaders and students have grown in environmental savvy over the years.

“We were not very conscious about using local species when we started, but we updated our knowledge. Local wildlife is attracted to such areas and make use of them,” says Ms Lye.

The native kopsia singapurensis, for instance, was planted in an “ecological corridor”, formerly two patches of grass, which serves as a transition between the Rainforest and Wetland located in different parts of the school. Providing forest cover in this way encourages wildlife to travel between these spaces, Ms Lye says, adding that more butterflies have been spotted in recent years.

It’s important that children are exposed to nature. Community in Bloom is a good gateway for the students, which will contribute to their love for nature in the future,” she says.

There have been challenges along the way, such as a few cases of birds crashing into the windows of the school, says Ms Lye. Fatalities include a jambu fruit dove in 2018.

Soon after the incident, anti-reflective stickers to thwart bird collisions were stuck on the windows. They prevent greenery from being mirrored in the glass, which gives the illusion of an unblocked



Teacher Lye Zhen Xi (centre) with students from the Eco Club in the Rainforest area at Commonwealth Secondary School. ST PHOTO: KUA CHEE SIONG

Japanese garden fine example of wabi-sabi

The garden in front of Nichiren Shoshu Buddhist Association (Singapore) is a fine example of the Japanese concept of wabi-sabi, says chief priest Shingako Kato.

Wabi-sabi finds beauty in things that are imperfect. The centuries-old aesthetic has been popularised outside Japan in recent times in areas like interior design.

Reverend Kato, 49, is the religious leader of the Kaimeyo-in temple within the association in Geylang. He explains that its garden, like many others in Japan, is built in the tradition of karesansui, “without the use of water”. In these dry gardens, white sand or pebbles are raked to suggest streams, while rocks symbolise mountains or islands.

He says: “Wabi” refers to the aesthetic sensibility that finds beauty in incompleteness or simplicity, while “sabi” signifies beauty that resides in the passage of time and the weathering of things.

The fusion of these two, expressed as wabi-sabi, forms the core of Japanese aesthetics, which values simplicity and tranquillity over ornamentation.

“Karesansui gardens may be regarded as one of the finest artistic embodiments of wabi-sabi.”

The Kaimeyo-in Japanese Garden has two main spaces where assistant priests at the temple – Reverend Jozen Suenaga, 34, and Reverend Myosho Nakano, 27 – rake and draw circular patterns in gravel, suggestive of rivers, at dawn every day, as part of their gardening duties. All three priests come from Japan, where Nichiren Shoshu Buddhism was established 800 years ago.

The 300 sq m garden, part of N’Parks’ Community in Bloom (CIB) programme, has won several CIB awards. Transformed from a patch overgrown withalang in 2013, it is maintained by 12 temple followers in their 50s to 80s. They trim the immaculate lawn of carpet grass every two months or so. Weeds are removed every day.

The garden has plants like Buddhist pine – which has been shaped like bonsai – oleander and bou-

gainvillea, as well as a path laid with stone slabs, and ponds with lotus and water lilies. The temple budgets \$3,000 a year to maintain it.

The beautiful garden draws photo-taking passers-by, tourists and domestic helpers on their day off. But it has been disturbed as well.

Thieves often take the lotus and water lilies when they bloom, sometimes scooping the pond fish too. Drunks have been found sprawled on the hedged lawn.

Reverend Kato is unruffled by the misbehaviour. He says: “People have different life conditions. We hope they can realise what they are doing. We just leave it, no big thing.”

He reiterates the hopes of one of his predecessors, the chief priest who built the garden 12 years ago, that it would become the “Oasis of Geylang.”

“When we look at the garden daily, we may not notice much difference. There is change, but no change. After several years, we can see that the trees have grown larger, moss has covered the stones, and many flowers have come into bloom, allowing us to truly feel the changes,” he says.

“What we wish to share is that happiness is not something given from outside, but something attained every two months or so. Weeds are removed every day. The garden has plants like Buddhist pine – which has been shaped like bonsai – oleander and bou-

Chief priest Shingako Kato in the Japanese garden at Nichiren Shoshu Buddhist Association (Singapore). ST PHOTO: VENESSA LEE

Family bonding at Garden of Love

When Ang Jet Hong was a young child, he and his older brother used to plant peanuts in the soil in their neighbourhood garden.

Now an 18-year-old student at St Joseph’s Institution, he recalls: “I picked up an interest in nature. I got to play with seeds, touch the ground and run around.”

It was a way to keep the boys occupied, says his housewife mother Eunice Teng, who later took them to activities organised at the Garden of Love in Jalan Berseh. She is married to a chemical engineer. The couple, who are in their 50s, also have a daughter.

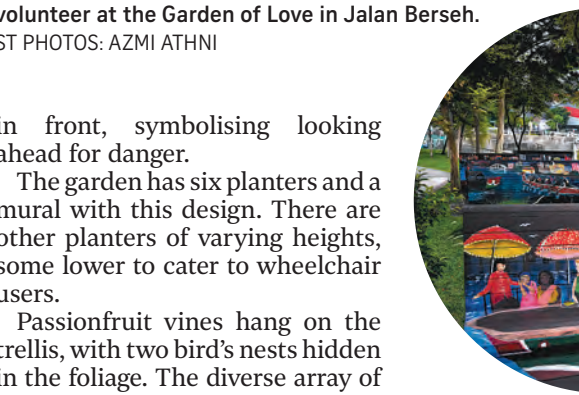
Ms Teng and Jet Hong are among 30 Community in Bloom (CIB) volunteers at this 80 sq m garden, which was started in 2014. Her husband also tends the garden.

Previously a sparse strip, the Garden of Love underwent a transformation in 2021 with the help of the Jalan Besar Town Council and Kelantan Residents’ Network, named after Kelantan and its Housing Board estate at the site. A bumboat theme, in line with the heritage of the neighbourhood next to the Rochor Canal, was introduced.

Bumboats, known as twakow or bangkaj, were once used to transport cargo along the Singapore River and Rochor and Kallang rivers. The boats had eyes painted



Student Ang Jet Hong and his mother Eunice Teng volunteer at the Garden of Love in Jalan Berseh. ST PHOTOS: AZMI ATHINI



Bumboat-themed benches near the garden showcase the heritage of the neighbourhood.

Jet Hong, who became involved in the CIB group about two years ago, says: “A garden is an interesting place to bring groups of people together who typically don’t interact. For instance, elderly members of the Active Ageing Centre nearby are out with their family members on weekends, when children are home from school.

“We want other people to know that the garden is an open space for anyone. They are welcome to come in and drink coffee; they can do homework at the table here.”

In December, he spearheaded efforts to paint and refurbish two sets of benches close to the garden with a bumboat theme. He managed to secure a grant of more than \$18,000 from the Lively Places Programme, a joint initiative by HDB and the Urban Redevelopment Authority, which supports the

enlightening of public spaces with art and community projects. Mother and son have bonded through gardening. He says: “We’re like collaborators and I can see how organised my mother is.”

Ms Teng adds: “I didn’t realise both a bumboat theme and netelulous. He keeps eye out for elderly residents at our events. “At least we get to communicate about new things.”

COMMUNITIES IN BLOOM

N’Parks’ gardening programme marks its 20th anniversary



Venessa Lee Senior Correspondent

As the Community in Bloom (CIB) gardening programme by the National Parks Board (N’Parks) marks its 20th anniversary in 2025, plans for training and expansion are under way.

Mr Thomas Lee, N’Parks’ director for Community Partnerships (Engagement), says: “It’s time for us to provide structured training for our CIB ambassadors to extend outreach and engagement to the community and to fellow gardeners.”

The Master Community Garden-

er training series was launched recently. Conducted by N’Parks horticulture experts, topics include soil management, plant nutrition and pest and disease control. Electives on using social media for engagement as well as therapeutic horticulture are being planned, says Mr Lee.

The pilot batch of four sessions was held in July for 20 CIB ambassadors. More than 100 CIB ambassadors have been appointed by N’Parks so far. These are volunteers with excellent horticulture skills

Mental health boost at swimming complex

Four times a week, Ms Choy Ah Pheng, 75, hits Woodlands Swimming Complex near her home at 7am.

She swims for an hour before taking a coffee break and working in the garden next to the pool for another two hours.

The grandmother and retiree says she enjoys talking to fellow senior volunteers from Team Nila, a sports volunteerism movement led by national agency Sport Singapore.

The three Community in Bloom garden plots at the swimming complex, started in 2018, provide companionship, health benefits and a sense of purpose for its 20 volunteers, who are mostly elderly people.

Plants like pandan, mulberry, Chinese spinach, curry leaf, eggplant, winter melon, chilli padi and hibiscus are grown in the 500 sq m space.

Volunteer and housewife Tay Pheng Eng, 74, says: “I don’t go out much as a housewife and I don’t talk much. But here, I feel happy and I am of use.”

Garden leader Ada Wichaino, 56, who also works as counsellor staff at the swimming complex, ensures the volunteers work in harmony.

She says: “I told them, you cannot say, ‘This is my plant and that is yours.’ All are our plants. There is also unity in how we give back to society together, through donating our vegetables or winter melons.”



(From far left) Team Nila volunteers Siew Kim Noi and Choy Ah Pheng tending to a curry leaf plant at the Woodlands Swimming Complex community garden. ST PHOTOS: NG SOR LUAN

The produce is regularly donated to a nursing home and a home for persons with disabilities.

Ms Wichaino, a Singapore citizen who was born in Thailand, says she has benefited from gardening. Her husband also works at the swimming complex at the reception area, and they have two children in their 30s.

She says: “This garden changed me a lot, from being hot-tempered to good-tempered. I used to suffer mental health struggles when my children



Garden leader Ada Wichaino says gardening has helped with her aches and hot temper.



Community in Bloom ambassador Lee May La with kale plants at a community garden near Block 106 Bukit Batok Central. ST PHOTO: NG SOR LUAN

with the opening of the Horticulture Festival at HortPark on Aug 23. It runs till Aug 31.

CIB ambassador Lee May La, 69, who attended the training in July, has been a volunteer leader at three gardens under the Bukit Batok Zone 2 Residents’ Network since 2011.

These comprise Cosy Garden, which has a vast array of plants; Lush Garden, which features sculptures made by CIB ambassadors and retired officer manager Richard Aspathworth, 71, and others; and Therapeutic Garden, which

provides a sensory experience through scent and touch. Altogether, these make up nearly 0.000 sq ft in space near Block 106 Bukit Batok Central.

Sustainability features abound, such as hydroponics, solar panels, a hot composting system where organic material is rapidly broken down at high temperatures, and a space dedicated to making fruit enzyme fertilisers.

Ms Lee’s interest has not flagged since she started gardening in 2011 for health benefits and to get more sunlight and Vitamin D after suffering from meningitis.

She says: “I kept up with it because it’s my hobby. We also started winning CIB awards, around 40 in total, which brought even more satisfaction. The residents were happy, which made us happy too.”

The Sunday Times checks out five community gardens with the wow factor.

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Healthy vegetable harvest atop hospital

The rooftop garden at Khoo Teck Puat Hospital regularly sprouts a bounteous harvest.

There are around 50 varieties of vegetables and 50 types of fruit trees grown in the edible garden set up in 2010, says Mr Simon Chan, 62, senior assistant manager of the hospital’s landscape department.

These include kale, sweet potato, mango and banana. There is even a durian tree, but it has never fruited.

The garden supplies about 18kg of cai xin, xiao bai cai and kailan to the hospital kitchen weekly, which feeds around 90 patients.

“These three vegetable varieties were chosen for their reliability in supporting patient well-being.

They grow reliably and have short harvesting times, ensure a steady supply of fresh produce. Additionally, their nutritional benefits and softer texture when cooked make them ideal for patients who may have difficulty chewing or digesting harder foods,” says Mr Chan.

The remaining produce is sold twice a week in a farmers’ market on hospital premises.

Because the organic vegetables are grown for patients’ consumption, care is taken to ensure no chemical pesticides are used, says Mr Chan. Pest management methods like fruit fly pheromone traps – to lure the insects that bore into, and lay eggs in fruit – are used instead.

The edibles produced are

Crop rotation is also practised, her adds. Changing plant types every harvest cycle reduces the pest load because different crops attract different pests.

The edibles produced are

The rooftop garden at Khoo Teck Puat Hospital supplies 18kg of early vegetables to the hospital kitchen every week. PHOTOS: N’PARKS



A volunteer harvesting vegetables.

sometimes whoppers, with out-sized fruit like an 11.95kg Chinese pumpkin one year.

Herbs like basil and perilla are also grown by some 16 Community in Bloom (CIB) volunteers, mostly retirees, including a couple in their 80s. Some garden daily, for up to five hours from 7am.

Mr Chan says: “We are always looking for more volunteers, especially young ones. It’s difficult as it’s backbreaking work and it’s hot up there. If you are planting, you have to squat down at the plot for a while.”

Nonetheless, it is rewarding when the garden wins CIB awards, he says.

He hopes these efforts will inspire more food production in the wider gardening community.

“My wish is that Singapore can be self-sustaining in food,” he says, pointing to the great strides the Republic has made towards water self-sufficiency.

BookTalk

ComChest chairman on twin loves of travel and books



Mr Chew Sutat, chairman of Community Chest, reads about exploration, history, culture, current affairs and existential philosophy. ST PHOTO: ONG WEE JIN

ONG SOR FERN Arts Editor

Who: Mr Chew Sutat, 53, chairman of Community Chest (ComChest) since 2022. The former executive vice-president and senior managing director at SGX retired four years ago and has been active in fund raising for meaningful causes throughout his career.

ComChest is the philanthropy and engagement arm of the National Council of Social Service. It was founded in 1983 and supports some 200 social service programmes.

One of its fund-raising events is the annual Heartstrings walk, first organised in 1988. The 2025 edition, co-organised with Marina Bay Sands, will be held at Marina Bay on Sept 6. Registration fee is \$25 an adult and \$20 a child. Registration closes on Sept 2. Go to hsw2025.com for more information.

“I am reading Shattered Lands by Sam Dalrymple. Island In The World by Simon Tay, and My Life And Travels by Wilfred Thesiger.

I have two major afflictions – wanderlust and tsundoku (the Japanese word for accumulating books at home without reading them).

The first has brought me barely back in one piece from Kyrgyzstan, where we and our Community Chest mascot Sharity visited the magical alpine lakes of Ala Kul, Song Kul and Izu Kul. No thanks to climate change, we encountered a snowstorm and an avalanche as part of our adventure in July.

The second crowds out my study with stacks of books in categories that are symbiotic. Travel and exploration intertwine with curiosity about how we got here through

history, culture and current affairs. Existential philosophy or zen books also litter the genres. I buy books with great anticipation of reading them. They stack up.

Travel writing lets me visit places vicariously and inspires me to follow the footsteps of the great travel writers. Thesiger, Peter Matthiessen, Colin Thubron, Rory Stewart and William Dalrymple have led me since my teens to Africa and South and Central Asia. I am re-reading Thesiger – described as one of the last great gentlemen explorer-adventurers – as this year’s travels overlapped with some of his journeys and reflections from almost a century ago.

In my trips – actual or through the yellowed pages of books – I learn about the fragility of life, the random chance of survival or success of individuals and societies, and experience the raw humanity of people and culture.

Shattered Lands, the first book by Sam Dalrymple (son of historian William), captures the events that led to the calamitous displacements across Asia as Britain decolonised.

With Barnes, the themes of survival, love and faith and where we stand as humanity are cleverly and beautifully woven, albeit in a sceptical lens, imbued with mythology and world history. Written in 1989, it still forces us to think and reaffirm our personal journey in light of new life experiences and the changing world around us.

I read anywhere I can, typically when I am on the road. Especially when I am forced to digital detox in places where there is not even 3G. A good book that allows reflection from distraction is good for mental health and the soul.

Two books I return to are Haemin Sunim’s The Things You Can See Only When You Slow Down and Julian Barnes’ A History Of The World In 10 1/2 Chapters.

Haemin’s book is a reminder to take a pause. While the messages appear simple, the layers of meaning are profound, and I make new discoveries each time I go back to read and reflect.

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Bestsellers

FICITION

- (-) Crossings: The Best Hainanese Chicken Rice And Other Life Dilemmas by Willie Cheng
- (-) The Original Daughter by Jemimah Wei
- (-) The Passengers On The Hankyu Line by Hiro Arikawa; translated by Allison Markin Powell
- (-) The Art Of Charlie Chan Hock Chye by Sonny Liew
- (-) Before The Coffee Gets Cold by Toshikazu Kawaguchi; translated by Geoffrey Trousslet
- (-) Strange Houses by Uketsu; translated by Jim Rion
- (-) The Healing Hippo Of Hinode Park by Michiko Aoyama; translated by Takami Niede
- (-) My Lady Hiraya by Steven Sy
- (-) The Midnight Library by Matt Haig
- (-) The Secret History by Donna Tartt

NON-FICTION

- (-) Living The Asian Century: An Un diplomatic Memoir by Kishore Mahbubani
- (-) I Am Not Good Enough by Ismail Gafurov and Low Shi Ping
- (-) Can Asians Think Of Peace? edited by Kishore Mahbubani
- (-) Why Palestine? Reflections From Singapore by Walid Jumblatt Abdullah
- (-) Letters For The Fragile Heart by Norhafsa Hamid
- (-) Retire With More Money by Tan Ooi Boon
- (-) The Mountain Is You: Transforming Self-Sabotage Into Self-Mastery by Brianna West
- (-) The Let Them Theory by Mel Robbins
- (-) Agak Agak: Everyday Recipes From Singapore by Shu Han Lee
- (-) The First Fools: 8-Sides Of Lee Kuan Yew’s A-Team edited by Peh Shing Hwei

CHILDREN’S

- (-) The Summer I Turned Pretty by Jenny Han
- (-) National Geographic Kids Almanac 2026 by National Geographic Kids
- (-) Ai And Aiko And The Little Curve by Peter Draw
- (-) The Very Hungry Caterpillar by Eric Carle
- (-) Top 10 Weirdest Critters Of Singapore’s Rainforest by Amaani Arifan
- (-) The World May Say This, But I Believe That! by Kelly Tay, illustrated by Chloe Chang
- (-) Once Upon A Broken Heart by Stephanie Garber
- (-) Harry Potter And The Philosopher’s Stone by J.K. Rowling
- (-) The Hugasaurus Board Book by Rachel Bright
- (-) I Can’t Do Many Things by Chua Hui Ying; illustrated by Isabelle Tan

• This is The Sunday Times’ compilation of bestseller lists from Kinokuniya, Epigram, Wardah Books, Book Bar, Afterimage and Bookshop.sg bookstores.