

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 understory of smaller plants closer to the ground," says Ms Lye.

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 NParks' 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 raking leaves to help. "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 strikes were stuck on the windows. They prevent greenery from being mirrored in the glass, which gives the illusion of an unblocked

expansion of trees for birds to fly through. The highlight of the school's sustainability focus is creating more wildlife encounters, says Ms Lye.

The highlight of the school's sustainability focus is creating more wildlife encounters, says Ms Lye. "There have been sightings of creatures like a red-whiskered bulbul, lesser dog-faced fruit bats and a common palm civet. In July, the civet was photographed taking a nap on a palm tree in the Rainforest.

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 Shinkago 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 Kaimyo-in temple within the association in Geylang. He explains that its garden, like many others in Japan, is built in the tradition of karansui, "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 may be regarded as one of the finest artistic embodiments of wabi-sabi."

The Kaimyo-in Japanese Garden has two main spaces where assistant priests at the temple – Reverend Jen Suena, 34, and Reverend Myoso Nakano, 27 – rake and draw circular patterns in gravel, suggestive of rivers, at 6am 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 NParks' Community in Bloom (CIB) programme, has won several CIB awards. Transformed from a patch overgrown with laang 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 Buddist pine – which has been shaped like bonsai – oleander and bou-



COMMUNITIES IN BLOOM

NParks' gardening programme marks its 20th anniversary

Venessa Lee
Senior Correspondent

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

Mr Thomas Lee, NParks' 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 NParks horticulture experts, topics include soil management, plant nutrition and pest and disease control. Lectives 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 2024. The 2025 edition of the programme will be held in 2025, plans for training and expansion are under way.

Mr Lee adds: "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-

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 Berserh. 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 Court, a 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 tongkang, were once used to transport goods 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 Berserh. ST PHOTOS: AZMI ATHNI

in front, symbolising looking ahead for danger.

The garden has six planters and a mural with this design. There are other planters of varying heights, some lower to cater to wheelchair users.

Passionfruit vines hang on the trellis, with two bird's nests hidden in the foliage. The diverse array of plants includes flowering portulaca, lemongrass and lady's finger. The CIB volunteers, mostly retirees, organise art and craft and other activities for the neighbourhood, especially during public holidays.

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 enlivening 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 before that he is patient and meticulous. He keeps an eye out for elderly residents at our events. At least we get to communicate about new things."

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 volunteer 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, curly leaf, eggplant, winter melon, chilli padai 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 active."

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

She says: "I told them, you can't 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."

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

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

were growing up. At the time, they were rebellious and did not want to study. I placed hopes that were too high upon them."

Ms Wichaino adds: "My mind used to run around a lot, but gardening is like a form of meditation, where I focus on the seeds and plants."

She says she no longer has bodily aches after daily exertions from gardening.

"When I see new leaves come in, it's new life. Plants wither and die; our lives are the same. Now I accept everybody; I have kindness towards them."

"This garden is like a hospital, giving me medicine."

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

On Sor Fern
Arts Editor

Mr Chew Sutat, 53, chairman of Community Chest (ComChest) since 2022. The former executive vice-president and senior managing director at SGM, 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 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 are apart from our Community Chest mascot Sharity visited the magical alpine lakes of Alai 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 writer Colin Thesiger, Peter Matthiessen and William Dalrymple, who have led me since my teens to Africa and South and Central Asia. I am 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 yellow pages of books – I learn about the fragility of life, the often random chance of survival or success of individuals and societies, and experience the common 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 partitions across Asia as Britain decolonised.

Conflicts over ethnic, religious and cultural lines resulting from capricious drawings of border lines from afar took apart societies and families, and led to tremendous loss of life. Understanding the past with many current narratives already rewritten by the victors and strident nationalists is educational and sobering.

In this regard, Island in The World, by my friend, NUS law associate professor Tay, is a timely and thoughtfully curated collection of his public commentaries from the 1990s exploring the issues of how Singapore engages with the world.

One can understand the present and have a view of what may come with better understanding of the past and how we got here through

the changing world around us.

I am also addicted to The Economic magazine, which I have been a subscriber to since I was 17.

My favourite quotes are from William Shakespeare's The Merchant of Venice – "We are such stuff that dreams are made on, and our little life is rounded with a sleep" – and Robert Pirie's Zen And The Art Of Motorcycle Maintenance – "The past cannot remember the past. The future cannot generate the future. The cutting edge of this instant right here and now is always nothing less than the totality of everything there is."

I prefer flipping pages. My favourite bookstores are in Britain. Blackwell's in Oxford has everything, and Waterstones Piccadilly has many first editions and signed copies of my favourite writers.

Bestsellers

FICTION

1. (–) *Crossings: The Best Hainanese Chicken Rice And Other Life Dilemmas* by Willie Cheng
2. (I) *I Am Not Good Enough* by Ismail Gafoor and Low Shi Ping
3. (C) *Can Asians Think of Peace?* edited by Kishore Mahubani
4. (C) *The Art Of Charlie Chan Hock Chye* by Sonny Liew
5. (C) *Before The Coffee Gets Cold* by Toshikazu Kawaguchi; translated by Geoffrey Trousselot
6. (I) *Strange Houses by Uketsu*; translated by Jim Rion
7. (–) *The Healing Hippo of Hindoo Park* by Michiko Aoyama; translated by Takami Nieda
8. (–) *My Lady Hiraya* by Steven Sy
9. (–) *The Let Them Theory* by Mel Robbins
10. (–) *AgaK Agak: Everyday Recipes From Singapore* by Shu Han Lee
11. (–) *The First Fools: B-Sides Of Lee Kuan Yew's A-Team* edited by Peh Shing Huei
12. (–) *The Secret History* by Donna Tartt

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

NON-FICTION

1. (–) *Living The Asian Century: An Undiplomatic Memoir* by Kishore Mahubani
2. (I) *I Am Not Good Enough* by Ismail Gafoor and Low Shi Ping
3. (C) *The Passengers On The Hankyu Line* by Hiro Arikawa; translated by Alison Markin Powell
4. (–) *The Art Of Charlie Chan Hock Chye* by Sonny Liew
5. (–) *Before The Coffee Gets Cold* by Toshikazu Kawaguchi; translated by Geoffrey Trousselot
6. (I) *Strange Houses by Uketsu*; translated by Jim Rion
7. (–) *The Healing Hippo of Hindoo Park* by Michiko Aoyama; translated by Takami Nieda
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12. (–) *The Secret History* by Donna Tartt

CHILDREN'S

1. (–) *The Sunday I Turned Pretty* by Jenny Han
2. (5) *National Geographic Kids Almanac 2026* by National Geographic Kids
3. (–) *Ai And Aiko And The Little Curve* by Peter Draw
4. (–) *The Very Hungry Caterpillar* by Eric Carle
5. (–) *Top 10 Weirdest Critters Of Singapore's Rainforest* by Amanai Arifan
6. (–) *The World May Say This, But I Believe That!* by Kelly Tay, illustrated by Chloe Chang
7. (6) *Once Upon A Broken Heart* by Stephanie Garber
8. (–) *Harry Potter And The Philosopher's Stone* by J.K. Rowling
9. (–) *The Hugasas Board Book* by Rachel Bright
10. (I) *I Can't Do Many Things* by Chua Hui Ying; illustrated by Isabelle Tan</