

BOOK REVIEW

Malaysian Herbal Heritage. Edited by Vimala Subramaniam. Forest Research Institute Malaysia, Kepong. 2013. 131 pp. ISBN 978-967-5221-90-3. RM180/USD108.

This is a well-illustrated coffee table book describing 50 important Malaysian heritage plants. The book is clearly written although a few phrases indicate the native tongue of the writer was not English, but the meaning is clear. This book aims “to preserve the traditional knowledge of herbs used in the prevention and treatment of diseases”. Fifty Malaysian plants regarded as the most important plants with medicinal properties have been selected from the 2000 species reported as having medicinal or well-being uses. However, only about 1200 higher plants are regularly used by various communities.

The book is divided into five chapters together with an introduction, glossary and index. The latter includes the scientific name and the main common name by which the plant is widely known. The titles of these chapters are: General Tonics; Women’s Health; Men’s Health; Aromatic Plants for Personal Care and the last chapter is devoted to Preventive Health Care. This book is timely as more and more people are turning to natural remedies as alternatives to synthesised products, partly because of cost and partly because of faith in remedies that have been tested over centuries. There is also concern for what we may be losing or have lost as habitat destruction continues. Several of the contributors raise the question of sustainability.

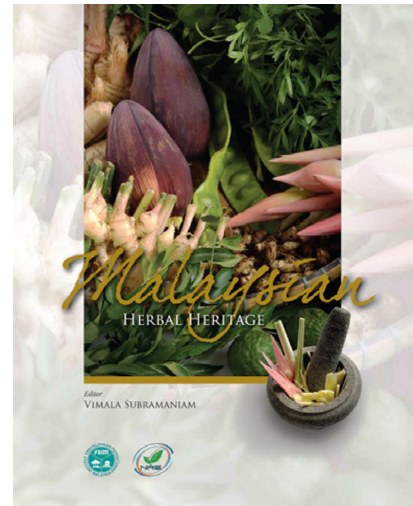
Each chapter follows the same format of an introduction followed by descriptions of the 10 species included in each chapter. I particularly enjoyed the introduction to Chapter One, as I had no idea there were so many different tonics. In fact it seems as though there was not only a general “pick-me-up” tonic but also a separate one for each organ of the body!

Each species description is supported by a full page

photograph of the plant as well as several smaller ones, illustrating the main features or even advertising products made from the plant. Besides the scientific name and authority, there is the name of the Family and one or more common or vernacular names as well as the parts of the plant that are used to treat various ailments. Each description follows a similar format.

Following the name and main common name i.e., the one by which it is ‘locally known’, are the salient features of the species, where it occurs naturally and if cultivated. For many species the method of propagation is also included. The last paragraph discusses what part of the plant is used and the ailments for which it is suitable. An example is *Centella asiatica*, “the whole plant is used as a tonic and as a cooling drink to relieve heatiness. The dry leaves are taken as herbal tea to stimulate blood circulation. It also helps to boost mental activity, hence to strengthen memory”. A tip at the bottom of the page suggests the leaves be eaten raw as a salad to prevent aging! I could not find a definition of ‘heatiness’ in the glossary, but I assume it is the equivalent of fever. Did you know that the seeds of *Brucea javanica*, if swallowed, can be used to treat haemorrhoids amongst other conditions?

Only in Chapter 5 are the chemicals listed for the active components, many of the plants included in this chapter are ones for personal use. Most of these species are considered to be high in natural antioxidants.



There were several irregularities that I noticed. *Ficus deltoidea* is a shrub or small tree but in the description it is initially described as a herb but later as a tree. The flowers of *Murraya koenigii* are described as large but the flowers of *Citrus hystrix* are considered small and yet both are very similar in size. This is one occasion when measurements would help. The book is remarkably free of spelling errors although p. 41, suggest ‘odoring’ should be odors, p. 45 bareable to bearable, p. 53 unpleasent to unpleasant and p. 105 informaion to information. These are minor errors and do not distract from an otherwise well-presented clearly written book. Some readers might like to see some references.

I thoroughly enjoyed reading this book and found the contents very interesting, but I did wonder what coffee tables it is meant to grace, as the price will put it out of the reach of many. I would like to see the information included here, be more readily available and the number of plants described increased. This traditional information needs to be well documented.

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