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From passion to profession

Botanist still doing the work he loves, 20 years after his official retirement
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Once a botanist, always a botanist

Septuagenarian's passion for his profession still burning bright after half a century



By SHALINI RAVINDRAN
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DR FRANCIS Ng's fascination with botany started at an early age, and he has no plans of stopping even after more than six decades.

The 78-year-old's passion for his chosen career still shines through as he took *StarMetro* on a private tour of the Secret Garden in 1Utama shopping centre, Petaling Jaya, Selangor.

Now a consultant botanist, Ng was full of enthusiasm as he provided us with nuggets of information about the plants and trees in the garden.

He was instrumental in setting up the Rainforest in the mall and the rooftop flower garden known as "Secret Garden."

The still-spry senior citizen regularly checks on the trees in the garden and is constantly looking for ways to improve it.

"Work in a garden is never done. There are always things that can be added, removed or changed around," he said.

While he admits that garden landscaping is more of a hobby, Ng's vast knowledge of tropical plants now goes into the many consultation jobs that he has taken up.

He is a former deputy director-general at Forest Research Institute of Malaysia (FRIM), before officially retiring in 1990.

"I have always been interested in plants, flowers and gardens since I was a teenager.

"One of my earliest memories was of my family home in Kampung Simee in Ipoh where we had some land around the house that was left mostly unused.

"So I started planting flowers, fruits and vegetables just for fun and they turned out well.

In his secondary school days, Ng was an active Scout and often explored the jungle.

"I must have spent more than 100 days camping in the forests. I loved it so much that it eventually became a career," he said.

In 1959, at the age of 19, as more Malaysians were being employed to fill vacant positions left by the British, Ng was offered a scholarship to pursue his botanical degree at University of Tasmania in Australia.

"There were a few of us during the interview for the scholarship and I was probably



Ng is now focused on research into fruit trees in Malaysia.

the only one who knew something about forests," he recalled.

He joined FRIM upon graduation in 1964 and was one of the handful of local botanists who undertook a 23-year project to survey 2,800 species of trees in peninsular Malaysia, all of which are documented in the four-volume *Tree Flora of Malaya*.

"Although each project has its challenges, this was definitely one of the longest.

"We went through dense forests and jungles to document and name those trees.

"I have visited most of the forests in Malaysia but the saddest part is that these forests and trees that I used to study in my work are gone," he said.

Still very much a scientist, Ng is now focused on research into fruit trees in Malaysia and has big plans to expand the industry.

"Marketing and utilising our fruit trees are still underdeveloped. Durian trees are just the beginning, because there are a lot of tropical fruits that have not been capitalised on," he said.

"We must make each day worthwhile and for me as a scientist, I try to spend at least an hour a day researching issues.

"This is why I am still working 20 years after my retirement," he quipped.

Ng has trained the staff at 1Utama's Secret Garden, who take care of the place in his absence. — Photos: SAM THAM/The Star



The Secret Garden on 1Utama's rooftop offers shoppers a soothing respite.