

# Urban Oasis to World Treasure: The Singapore Botanic Gardens

By Anne Pinto Rodrigues

In April 2015, a new hybrid orchid joined the 200 other orchids in the Singapore Botanic Gardens' VIP Orchids collection. This special orchid was none other than the *Aranda Lee Kuan Yew*, named after the founding father of modern Singapore. Ironically, the first flowering of the *Aranda Lee Kuan Yew* coincided with the passing of Singapore's chief gardener. This robust hybrid is a product of the innovative orchid breeding programme at the Singapore Botanic Gardens.

As one of the most visited botanic gardens in the world, the 156-year old Singapore Botanic Gardens receive over 4.4 million people each year. It is only fitting that this urban oasis should be Singapore's first UNESCO World Heritage Site nomination.

The Singapore Botanic Gardens (the Gardens) began as an ornamental garden in 1859. Local businessman and prominent member of the Agri-Horticultural Society, 'Whampoa' Hoo Ah Kay, negotiated with the colonial government for 23 hectares of land in the Tanglin district to be donated for this purpose. Designed in the English landscape style, many of the Gardens' original features such as Swan Lake and the Tanglin Main Gate, remain today. In the late 1800s, the Gardens even housed a zoo with about 140 exotic animals and birds.



*The Aranda Lee Kuan Yew hybrid orchid in bloom. Photo courtesy of the National Parks Board*



*The Tanglin Main Gate, a landmark of the Singapore Botanic Gardens. Photo courtesy of the Singapore Botanic Gardens Archives, National Parks Board*

The recreational nature of the Gardens changed when Henry Nicholas Ridley became its first director. During his tenure (from 1888 to 1911), Ridley focused on developing latex extraction techniques that caused minimal damage to the rubber tree (*Hevea brasiliensis*). His research made rubber-growing in Southeast Asia a viable proposition and soon rubber became the major cash crop of the region. Even today, it continues to be an important export commodity. The Gardens' role in shaping the early Southeast Asian economy was invaluable.

The Gardens were also an important venue for Singapore's early nation-building efforts. When Singapore became self-

governing in May 1959, one key area of focus for the newly elected government was the development of a sense of unity and national identity among its people. They mooted the idea of free, open-air cultural events with performances from the main communities –

Malay, Chinese, Indian and others such as the Eurasians. The Gardens were the venue for the first concert, also known as *Aneka Ragam Ra'ayat* (or People's Variety Show). A special stage was constructed near the lake for this. The concert was held on 2 Aug 1959 with over 22,000 people attending. Mr Lee Kuan Yew, the Prime Minister of Singapore at the time, inaugurated the event. The first show's success led to over 200 more being organised in different locations between 1959 and 1964. Each of these shows attracted thousands of people from different backgrounds, thus promoting a sense of social cohesion.

In mid-May 2015, the International Council on Monuments and Sites (ICOMOS) gave its recommendation to the UNESCO World Heritage Committee, for the Singapore Botanic Gardens to be inscribed as a UNESCO World Heritage Site. ICOMOS recognised the Gardens to be "of Outstanding Universal

Value as a cultural property" and an "exceptional example of a British tropical colonial botanic garden in Southeast Asia". ICOMOS also noted the Gardens' position as "a leading centre in plant science, research and conservation in Southeast Asia."

Singapore now anxiously awaits the outcome of the UNESCO bid. If successful, it will join the hallowed company of the Royal Botanic Gardens in Kew, England (1759) and the Orto Botanico di Padova in Padua, Italy (1545). The final decision is expected to be announced in July 2015.



*The Monkey House, where a small collection of monkeys was kept. Photo courtesy of the Singapore Botanic Gardens Archives, National Parks Board*



*Henry Nicholas Ridley with the rubber tree bearing the herringbone design for latex tapping. Photo courtesy of the Singapore Botanic Gardens Archives, National Parks Board*

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**Anne Pinto Rodrigues** enjoys spending time at the Singapore Botanic Gardens, observing its flora and fauna. She is an avid traveller and blogs at No Roads Barred (<http://noroadbarred.wordpress.com>) about her travel experiences.

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