

## High 5 for LKY; Singapore's Chief Gardener

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**NATION-BUILDING:** Mr Lee Kuan Yew planting a Mempat tree in Farrer Circus in June 1963, to signify the start of an island-wide tree-planting campaign to help bring rain. Mr Lee envisioned that a clean and green Singapore would carry a competitive advantage.

--ST FILE PHOTO

Mr Lee Kuan Yew planted his first tender sapling on June 16, 1963.

When he bedded down the little Mempat tree in Farrer Circus, a traffic roundabout, he also seeded a civilised garden city in an unruly land.

In season, the tree, a native of dank South-east Asian jungles, was crowned with pale pink blossoms that looked like sakura.

Mr Lee planted the tree amid a drought to signify the start of an island-wide tree-planting campaign to help bring rain. A vegetative cover helps to produce and filter water.

In time, the prosaic rationale would acquire a complexity and subtlety that closely mirrored the country's jagged trajectory to the First World.

Mr Lee envisioned that a clean and green Singapore would carry a competitive advantage.

'After independence, I searched for some dramatic way to distinguish ourselves from other Third World countries. I settled for a clean and green Singapore,' he wrote in his 2000 memoir, *From Third World To First*. 'Greening is the most cost-effective project I have launched.'

A well-tended city sent a signal to investors and VIPs that Singapore was a disciplined nation that cared about maintenance and order.

Greenery lifted the morale of the people, too, when the country was still a crude outpost. Later, when Singapore was a shiny metropolis, Mr Lee would say in his memoir that his own spirits rose each time he motored from the airport down verdant East Coast Parkway.

Tree-planting was turned into a nation-bonding exercise as well. Citizens and foreign dignitaries alike have been roped in to beautify Singapore since the first official Tree Planting Day on Nov 7, 1971.

Mr Lee still unfailingly plants a new tree in November every year - the start of the rainy season, which minimises watering.

So the grand theme of the garden city is nation-building. Said Mr Poon Hong Yuen, chief executive of the National Parks Board (NParks): 'We must remember that the greening of modern Singapore started when we were still not well-off. Now, we take it for granted that Singapore is and should be green, but why should it be a priority for a country that could not even be certain about its economic survival?'

'I believe it is because Mr Lee saw greening as an integral part of nation-building. Well-managed greenery helped at that time to convince investors that Singapore was a place where things worked. It has also instilled in Singaporeans a sense of pride that they live in the Garden City. These are benefits that cannot be easily quantified, but critical to nation-building.'

Today, almost 50 per cent of the island is covered with greenery. No corner is left ungreened - not urban canyons or Chinatown, police stations or schools, overhead bridges or old estates.

This political equipoise was unlike the colonial British style of cultivating only the prestigious enclaves in Tanglin and around Government House (now the Istana). Elsewhere, the land was barren.

Today, about two million trees have sprouted, and each is recorded in the NParks database.

This eye for obsessive detail was no doubt imparted by the Chief Gardener, Mr Lee.

Mr Wong Yew Kwan, 79, the first commissioner of Parks and Recreation from 1974 to 1982, would be flooded with the then Prime Minister's memos and endless wish lists.

Recalled Mr Wong, an Oxford-schooled silviculturist: 'He liked walking in the Botanic Gardens in the evening. Then his personal secretary would call with requests. Mr Lee might see pruned branches left on the side of the road. Or he wanted to know why the leaves had fallen from a troubled tree.'

Mr Lee, who studied in Cambridge and noticed that even busy London had stately elms, was so passionate about plants that he grew knowledgeable about soil and drainage, climate and fertilisers.

He surveyed the continents for new plants, which have been introduced from places like Australia and South America.

His first priority was to put a cool canopy over Singapore with shade trees such as the angkana and rain tree, which he favoured. Then came the civic beautification, with flowering and fruit trees that drew the songbirds he noticed had been missing.

He exerted decades of strong political will to create a Garden City, not letting climate get in his way, or the survival rate of exotic imports, or children who vandalised new plants.

But sceptics today complain that the garden city is a high-maintenance artifice that is lacking in bio-diversity.

Dr Geh Min, immediate past president of the Nature Society (Singapore) and a former Nominated MP, wrote in *Management Of Success: Singapore Revisited*, published last year: 'The garden city was a mere backdrop for the urban landscape, a highly engineered and managed showcase for good governance superimposed on Singaporeans who had no role other than as passive spectators and recipients.'

She told *The Straits Times* that this 'over-manicured' and 'top-down' approach does not convey a respect for nature. 'Instead it's the feeling that you can create anything if you have the money,' she said.

Besides, the definition of greening has to be broadened, she argued, to include conservation of marine areas which are environmentally the most threatened. Truer greening must also mean greater citizen participation in basic green responsibilities like recycling, and a more active role for Singapore in global environmental issues, she added.

In reality, much has been irreversibly lost despite the pretty Garden City veneer. A road runs through the Bukit Timah Nature Reserve, which is home to more tree species than the whole of the North American continent. Nature reserves make up about 5 per cent of Singapore now. Vegetable plots, swamps and coral reefs have also made way for progress.

Still, green activists such as Dr Geh give some credence to the notion that 'top-down green is better than no green'.

Mr Poon, the NParks CEO, said: 'The conventional wisdom is that development is achieved at the expense of nature. In Singapore, our green cover, worked out from satellite images, has grown from 36 per cent in 1986 to 47 per cent in 2007, despite rapid economic and population growth.'

'So, rather than thinking of our green drive as 'artificial', I would prefer to say we have achieved something extra-ordinary through sheer will and decades of hard work.'

Officialdom's approach is more refined as well. He said: 'From orderly trees that showcased our efficiency, we are now aiming for greater urban biodiversity and options for nature recreation that make Singapore a great city to live in.'

So this greening drive has been widened over the years by NParks, which has recast the 'Garden City' as 'A City in a Garden' distinguished by a seamless green infrastructure of parks and streetscapes. To date, the Park Connector Network linking parks, nature sites and housing estates spans 150km.

NParks now works more with corporations and the community on programmes to stoke a love of the environment. Last year, Sembcorp Industries sponsored the Sembcorp Forest of Giants in Telok Blangah Hill Park. The saplings include the Tualang (*Koompassia excelsa*) that can grow as tall as a 30-storey HDB block.

Looking ahead, political risk consultant Azhar Ghani noted in a recent paper - *Success Matters: Keeping Singapore Green*, published by the Institute of Policy Studies - that the next phase of the greening journey will see greater focus on 'recreation and leisure, catering for different interests and lifestyle aspirations, innovations and creativity for greening up Singapore'.

Meanwhile, the first Mempat Mr Lee planted is no more.

An NParks spokesman said the tree was removed but not replanted when Farrer Circus made way for roadworks. However, other Mempat or *Cratoxylum formosum* trees still flower in places from Ang Mo Kio Avenue 8 to the Hundred Trees condominium in West Coast.

The 'pioneering' Mempat was felled by progress, but the greening drive it heralded is alive.