

8 Spaces

All questions are answered by Dr Christopher Teh, soil biologist and senior lecturer at Universiti Putra Malaysia.



Dear Plant Doctor

Your gardening questions answered by an expert. Send your queries to faq@eatsshootsandroots.com.

Q HOW long does it take for a longan tree to bear fruits? Mine is three years old and all it does is sprout big, huge healthy leaves that I prune away constantly. I also fertilise it fortnightly. – Ellis Lee

A YOUR tree should be flowering and bearing fruits at this age. However, longan is a subtropical tree that prefers slightly cooler temperatures than those we experience in Malaysia. This means growing fruit-bearing longan trees here can be a challenge, and quite a lot of technical expertise is required to induce flowering and also to maintain the tree.

However, one simple problem with yours might be too much fertiliser. Feeding it once every two weeks is too often. Generally, longan trees require about 500g to 2kg of NPK (nitrogen, phosphorus and kalium) 15:15:15 fertiliser per tree per year, split into four to five applications over the year.

Q I HAVE been growing this lemon tree for about four years now, and it barely has lemons on it. There are many little black dots on the leaves that can't be sprayed off; I tried to trim them off but they keep coming back. Today, I saw two small lemons dropped prematurely. Please help! – Betty



A THE black spots could be signs of aphid attacks. These aren't usually a problem unless you see many infected leaves. You can spray neem oil mixed with water to control aphids.

Premature fruit drops or no fruits could be a sign of over-watering or over-fertilisation. Water just enough to keep the top soil moist (not wet). And fertilise according to the instructions on your fertiliser package; get those specially formulated for citrus trees for easier maintenance.

Q I HAVE these plants which look like they are about to wilt (right); is it because of too much or too little water? Also, what's the ratio of neem oil to water for making an insect repellent? And where can I buy neem water? I added orange peels into my compost and maggots appeared. How do I eliminate them? – Sally



A UNDER- and over-watering often cause the same symptoms. Stick a finger into the soil, about 2cm to 3cm deep, and feel if the soil is too dry or wet. If it is too dry, you need to add more water; if too wet, stop watering until the top soil has dried. If possible, change the soil if you have over-watered.

The ratio of neem oil to water is about 10ml of neem oil to 1 litre of water. You can easily get neem oil online.

If your compost has maggots, it means the heap is not composting well. Proper composting should not have any bad smells or maggots. You may have either over-watered your compost heap or added the wrong mixture/combination of browns and greens.

Avoid adding meat or oil into your compost heap. Alternatively, try burying your orange peels so they are not exposed to flies.

A little green kampung in the city

This community garden in USJ6 has all the plants and herbs you'd normally see in a village.

Ready, set, grow!

By Eats, Shoots & Roots

THE space was being eyed by a private corporation for development when the residents decided they would much rather have a green spot.

And that, simply, is how this award-winning edible community garden in USJ6, Subang Jaya, Selangor, began in 2015.

Dr Sairin Salleh, 48, an assistant general manager at Telekom, is the chairman of the 344-member *persatuan penduduk* (residents' association); he explains that the residents banded together and worked with the Subang Jaya Municipal Council (SJMC) to create this well-loved, living garden that has added a sense of belonging and value to the neighbourhood.

Carol Teng, 64, a financial planner and avid gardener, says: "Before the garden, we didn't really know each other. Even though we lived on the same street, we didn't interact much – we all just went home to do our own thing."

The garden is managed by the residents' association with 32 member gardeners with allotments, and they are all types – the elderly, retirees, and working adults and families.

How did the garden start?

Sairin: During one of the *persatuan*'s quarterly *gotong-royong* sessions to clean the lanes in the housing area, we saw that many people had little home gardens. So we posed the idea of extending their gardening to a bigger space that everybody can share. When we proposed it to SJMC, they thought it was a good idea.

This place (where the garden is) was the most quiet and underutilised. We wanted to bring life to this area because we didn't want it to be used for other purposes that might not benefit our community here in USJ6.

What is the garden's main objective?

Teng: For us, it's for members of the USJ6 community to meet up, interact, and get to know each other better. If not, we will all be behind closed doors!

Sairin: Previously, we didn't have an ongoing, continuous programme that brought residents together. This garden brings people in almost every day. We also wanted to make this area more environmentally friendly and *ceria* (lively).

What makes this garden a success?

Sairin: It's the commitment from the members and teamwork. We wanted to create a village in the city. We wanted a garden that has almost everything you would find in kampung gardens – when you go to a village, you can see many different types of herbs and plants all over.

Why is a garden important?

Teng: You can't replace a living garden with artificial plants. That's what happens at a lot of property developments; they're using plastic plants and trees to decorate common areas.

But when you touch a plastic plant, you can't feel anything. But when you touch a real plant, you feel there's life in it. And where there's life, there's love. You need love to grow plants. And they give us oxygen!

Sairin: Our garden supplies residents with fresh produce. We are assured that we are controlling insects and pests with our own organic repellents. To repel pests with anything else may poison the produce. We don't buy any commercial pesticide or chemical repellents, or fertilisers. We make everything ourselves.



The residents make their own natural, chemical-free compost.



Allotment owner Noraini Ahrm



Among the edible plants found in the garden are (from left) cili padi that will turn colour from green to dark purple to red when ripe, long purple brinjal (this one happens to be conjoined!), and sawtooth coriander (*ketumbar jawa*, *Eryngium foetidum*).

The garden also supports residents who don't have the opportunity to balik kampung to do their gardening or farming activities.

What inspires you to garden?

Sairin: I saw a video on social media that explains how all food is exposed to chemicals. The produce in supermarkets are pretty to look at but they are grown with a lot of harmful chemicals. I wanted chemical-free food.

Gardening is therapy for us, and the garden a place to de-stress and exercise, to better our lives.

Teng: I've always loved gardening, and I used to grow vegetables in my own backyard. When they introduced this garden, they said that this would be on a bigger scale. So I can grow things that I can't grow at home because of space restrictions – creepers and tubers that need more space.

Are there any allotment rules?

Teng: There are no hard and fast

rules. Upon harvesting, if we have a lot of the same vegetables, we'll share among ourselves. We'll ask who would like to have what in our group chat.

About deciding what to grow, we normally grow herbs or short-term plants (that can be harvested quickly). No big trees or long-term fruit trees that take a long time to mature.

What are the main challenges that you face?

Sairin: Firstly, sustaining the garden. Secondly, getting people or residents to come to the garden to raise awareness about how gardening is a healthy activity. Thirdly, maintaining boundaries – we've had problems with animals coming in and making a scene.

Fourthly, dealing with complaints from some of the residents. In the initial stages, some were worried that we were going to take over the entire playground in the area. But we ended up taking only a quarter of the space.

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village gardens.



USJ6 gardening enthusiasts took just two years to turn the empty spot above into a thriving edible garden – partially pictured on the left – with 32 allotments, a herb and spice garden, and compost area. — Photos: Eats, Shoots & Roots



had tends to her plot almost daily.

fifth challenge is to leverage the ig opinions among residents. members might say something like ouldn't plant this, or you shouldn't ere", or someone might say that ke care of general maintenance ften than others. What we do is cussions to find common l.

also had to find a way to manage un. We did a collection, a small M5, so we could grow. If your on the larger side, you'd pay a it more for utilities.

do you do with the produce?

We make drinks with bunga (butterfly pea flower). We harvest 1 leaves to make kuih or jelly. We take roses out of the leaves as a tion – Japanese pandan roses! We t tapioca for the Mid-Autumn l.

r the herbs, if I have a slight sore I will pluck some hempedu bumi – "bile of the earth", very bitter! – ew on them for the juice before g them out and my sore throat is

ere are so many types of herbs here. ighs, we have oregano – just it, make into tea, and drink it.

in: I have a stomach condition (le bowel syndrome), and had to ot of medicine after I was diag- I did some research and found t herbs can help – ulam (traditional aves), ginger, kemangi (lemon ince September 2011, I have not ny medication.

is, in fact, one of my main inspi- to be in the garden, and how to : produce.

do you use fertilisers and pest repellents use?



The USJ6 gardening gang. Before the garden brought them together everyone 'did their own thing' and neighbours didn't know each other.



Intan Jailani and Abdul Razak Abdul Aziz love spending time in their allotment.

Teng: We do our own composting and make our own enzymes with orange peel, pineapple, and lemon. I separate them all, and then I use the residue as a compost. The liquid is used to spray on plants as a repellent for insects.

We use sodium bicarbonate together with dishwashing liquid and a little bit of oil to make a solution that we use to kill the white flies that infest cili padi plants. But the concoction must be very diluted or all the leaves will drop off.

How do you encourage young people to garden?

Sairin: The encouragement needs to come from the parents who work on the garden. Most of them also have their own garden at home, so they can teach the children at home too.

We also have a photography programme for young people, and one centre point is our garden. They will take photos and spread the word among friends.

Through our school programme, we invite students to work in the garden and give them a certificate of participa-

tion at the end.

Do you have any advice for communities that are just getting started?

Teng: First and foremost, involve those who are truly committed. From what I know, a lot of people behind urban gardens here are not committed. So after half a year, it'll dwindle off.

Sairin: My advice is to first show your interest. You need to have a group with the same interest. We have 300 members but only 40 are really passionate.

Then you need to have the support of the authorities.

You also need to improve your knowledge about new technologies and new methods of planting; I'm not a specialist, I'm doing gardening for my own consumption only but I still do this.

Lastly, you must use social media to raise awareness and also build a platform to sustain the garden.

Eats, Shoots & Roots is a social enterprise that champions urban edible gardening. For more information, go to eatsshootsandroots.com or [facebook.com/eatsshootsandroots](https://www.facebook.com/eatsshootsandroots) or e-mail hello@eatsshootsandroots.com.

Green events

SOULFOOD SERIES: DAIRY-FREE ALTERNATIVES WITH JUNJI DELFINO

SPICE up your taste buds by learning how to make your own simple, non-dairy dips and sauces to complement dishes made with produce from the garden.

The workshop will be presented by renowned jazz singer Junji Delfino who is almost as famous among social media followers and friends for deliciously re-creating the Eurasian dishes she grew up with. When a family member fell ill about nine years ago, Delfino latched on to the concept of cooking "healthier substitutes that are equally delicious", which she will share at the workshop.

Date: Saturday Dec 2
Time: 10am-2.30pm
Location: Eats, Shoots & Roots HQ, Petaling Jaya (full address upon registration)
Price (inclusive of a meal cooked by the facilitator): RM250 (RM230 if you mention *Star2*)
To register (required, places limited to 10): Go to the website workshops.eatsshootsandroots.com;

for inquiries, e-mail clarice@eatsshootsandroots.com

GROW YOUR OWN MINI HERB GARDEN @ ILHAM GALLERY

THIS workshop is for anyone who wants to grow herbs on their balcony (or any other small space). Before you start planting, first you need to understand the basics of healthy soil and how to create a happy space for herbs to grow in a container.

The workshop will cover choosing the right container, preparing your own potting mix, planting seeds/seedlings, and learning how to keep your herbs happy!

Date: Saturday, Dec 9
Time: 3pm-4pm
Location: Ilham Gallery, Menara Ilham, No. 8, Persiaran KLCC, KL
Price (inclusive of booklet and planter kit worth RM50): RM105 (RM85 if you mention *Star2*)
To register (required, as places are limited): Go to the website workshops.eatsshootsandroots.com; for inquiries, e-mail clarice@eatsshootsandroots.com



Chillies contain a compound called capsaicin that is responsible for the heat we feel when we eat them; it also has antibacterial properties. Garlic has a pungent smell that insects find unpleasant, and it also has antibacterial properties. So combining the two creates an effective pest repellent – and a safe one, as chilli and garlic can safely be used on food and don't leave dangerous residue in the soil.

This chilli-garlic spray is a useful repellent for ants, aphids, beetles, flies, grubs, mealybugs, mildew, rust flies, scale, and whiteflies.

INGREDIENTS:

- Garlic cloves
- Chillies
- Water
- Blender
- Strainer
- Container to store the concentrate
- Biodegradable dish soap
- Glass/plastic bottle
- Trigger spray

METHOD:

1. Puree the garlic, chillies and water in a blender.
 2. Pour the mixture through a strainer into a container.
 3. Add the soap to the strained puree and stir well.
 4. Dilute two tablespoons of this concentrate with 1 litre of water in your bottle.
 5. Fit the trigger spray onto the bottle and use it happily in the garden!
- TIP:** Spray about once a week to help kill pests and keep fungal issues at bay. Coat plant leaves well, especially where the pest or fungal problem is worst.