

KERATAN AKHBAR



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Growing forests: A doable venture

MY husband and I are KLites who decided to move to Melaka to settle down in 2012, as we could buy an affordable bungalow here. All around our house we have planted a good variety of shade trees and flowering plants as well as fruit-bearing ones. As we sat on the patio surrounded by our little forest, complete with dangling vines, the recent haze episode with API (Air Pollutant Index) readings of 120 to 180 didn't seem to exist. But once we stepped out of our green enclave, the haze hit us as hard as it did everyone else.

A letter I saw in a daily said "Our jungles need a break from human activity to heal". Indeed, the letter writer is right, but human greed is more prevalent than the logical thinking of a 16-year-old Greta Thunberg who leads students globally on weekly "climate strikes".

The fires in the forests of the Amazon and in Indonesia may have subsided, as well as the peat fires in Malaysia, hopefully, but there is still no assurance that the torching of forests will stop.

Most people know that trees produce oxygen and absorb carbon dioxide, but many do not realise that trees also function as dust absorbers. I was fortunate to watch a documentary on BBC Knowledge several years ago that showed the result of a study of a row of houses on a busy street. They planted a row of almost mature silver birch trees in big planter boxes in front of a row of houses, while on the adjacent side of the road, no trees



Grow a forest: Mature trees at Tengku Anis Hospital, Pasir Puteh, Kelantan (picture taken in 2018). — Picture provided

were planted. After a period, they measured the dust concentration on the surface of the TV screens in all the houses. They found that houses that had the silver birch trees in front had much lower amounts of particulate matter (dust) compared with the houses without the trees. So, obviously, to reduce the effects of the haze and other sources of on-going air pollution like vehicular smoke, the best thing we can do is to plant more trees.

In all the hospitals I managed when I was working, I planted a lot of trees with a minimal budget.

Most of the trees were grown from seeds or cuttings or I acquired them for free from kind nursery owners. I made sure I didn't use my hospital's budget.

At Tengku Anis Hospital, Kelantan, where I was the hospital director from the end of 1998 to 2004, I managed to create a little forest with the support of the then state health director, Datuk Dr Pius Premaraj, and with the generosity of a local contractor, a 0.8km sand-based jogging track was created in the midst of this forest.

On the last day of my 34-year service with the Health Ministry at

Hospital Sultanah Bahiyah Hospital Alor Setar, together with my staff and family and friends, we planted about 30 chokanan mango trees and several banana and coconut trees in the vicinity of a retention pond behind the hospital. A year later and until now, the staff enjoy the literal fruits of our labour.

I have not only planted trees at hospitals that I managed, but also at health clinics, mosques, graveyards, schools, public fields, jungle verges and roadsides. As I started earlier, it doesn't cost much when you have the passion and care to grow them from seeds and cuttings or seedlings plucked from the ground.

So let us all create a forest or a mini jungle where there are vacant plots and spaces, wherever they may be. Even better, establish a food forest, especially since our country still depends on other countries for a lot of our food.

Studies have shown living or even simply spending time in a forest atmosphere can actually reduce blood pressure and provide a sense of tranquillity.

Therefore working or studying within forest settings would improve a person's health and well-being. If schools were surrounded by forests or mini jungles that students themselves could help to create, if the miserable haze reappears, perhaps we would not have to close schools.

As Greta and environmental activist George Monbiot state in

their video *Protect, Restore And Fund* that is currently going viral, trees are the natural climate solution. Trees are valuable natural assets to effectively suck in carbon and lock it away to contain climate change. By growing forests, we will:

- > Produce more oxygen for our earth (not just in our neighbourhood);
- > Reduce air pollution;
- > Reduce flash floods and soil erosion;
- > Contain water and reduce occurrences of droughts;
- > Reduce the overall temperature;
- > Improve soil fertility (with good and effective micro-organisms);
- > Produce habitats for wildlife, bees and other flora;
- > Produce more food.

For Muslims, growing and taking care of trees is considered a benevolent task. As long as the tree lives and provides all of the above functions for humankind and other living things, even though we have long expired, we will continue to accumulate good reward (Pahala Jariah). So let's all grow more trees, and if we can't personally do it, then let us be generous in funding and supporting tree planting programmes. It is doable and we need to start right away.

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