



KERATAN SURAT KHABAR

SURAT KHABAR	:	SUNDAY STAR		
TARIKH	:	29/8/2021 (AHAD)	MUKA SURAT	: 12
JABATAN	:	JPSM		

Our timeless national icons

More needs to be done to promote Malaysia's symbols – our national flower, the hibiscus, and the merbau as our national tree. The National Landscape Department is urging local authorities to grow more hibiscus along roads and in places of interest while it will also promote the merbau tree as part of our natural heritage.

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MALAYSIA'S national flower, the regal bunga raya or hibiscus, deserves to be in full bloom in our own country. More efforts should be made to elevate the status of the flower (known scientifically as *Hibiscus rosa-sinensis*) as a national symbol, says National Landscape Department director-general Rotina Mohd Daik. "We encourage local authorities nationwide to plant the hibiscus at strategic places to project its image as our country's icon and where its beauty can be admired. "For example, hibiscus shrubs can be planted along roads leading to places of significance or buildings of interest, such as roads leading to Parliament or state assem-

bly buildings all over the country. "Tourist areas like museums should also be decorated with such blooms as those are places where our national flower can be introduced to foreigners and citizens alike," she tells *Sunday Star*. There have been previous efforts to line roads and surroundings in Malaysia with the beautiful bunga raya. In 2019, the Raub District Council in Pahang planted 2,000 hibiscus shrubs along main roads to raise the flower's profile in the state. There was also a Nationwide Hibiscus Planting Campaign in 2005 whereby

all local authorities were urged to grow them in parks and public areas, aside from encouraging every household to plant at least one hibiscus tree. "Over 4.5 million hibiscus trees were successfully grown by the authorities involved during the campaign which lasted until 2016," says Rotina, adding that the department had recorded the data in the initiative. However, she stresses that such efforts to promote the flower should be continuous and updated. It should be done by various agencies and ministries to instill the flower's status in the minds of citizens now and in the future. "Malaysians should know it, and feel proud of it like how we are proud of our flag, not just during Hari Merdeka and Malaysia Day," she says.



All about our national flower

COMMON NAME
Hibiscus, Bunga Raya, Bunga Sepatu, Kembang Sepatu, Shoe Flower, China rose

SCIENTIFIC NAME
Hibiscus Rosa-sinensis

FAMILY NAME
Malvaceae

PLACE OF ORIGIN
China and islands in the Pacific Ocean

FEATURES
Leaves: Light green, short leaves with oval outline and serrated edges.
Type: Flowering shrub
Flowers: Medium large, blooms throughout the year
Flower Colours: Red, pink, white, yellow and orange

USAGE
Used as landscape plants to beautify surroundings.
In medicinal practice, some hibiscus species can be used as an antidote to poisons, relieving headaches and fever.
Another hibiscus species, the Hibiscus sabdariffa or Roselle can be made into syrup, jam and candy.

Height: 2 to 3 metres (mature/maximum size).

PLANTING THE HIBISCUS
This flower is easy to grow and maintenance is simple.
It is categorized as a hardy shrub.
Hibiscus plants are suitable to be grown in residences, business premises and government buildings.

FOUR PLANTING METHODS
Cuttings of stem sections – widely used in Malaysia because it is easier. Fine stems cut from the parent tree are planted directly by rubbing a little root booster powder.
Grafting – mostly done on larger hibiscus plants where the bark around the stem is removed, and a mound of soil accompanied by root booster powder is placed around it. After the roots start to grow in the area of the stem where the bark was cut, it can be planted separately from the parent tree.
Bud grafting – this is done when there are buds from a parent tree is grafted to another parent tree and the buds are allowed to germinate on the parent tree that has been transplanted.
Through seeds – hibiscus seeds are widely used in countries with four seasons.

INTERESTING FACTS
10 species of hibiscus were found in Malaysia in the past. They were used as food, fiber, medicine and ornamental plants.
A lot of hybridization and culturing has since been done on the hibiscus.
There are about 3,000 hybrid

hibiscus and varieties registered worldwide.
In Malaysia, there are up to 300 hibiscus species at present.
Among them are the Hibiscus Rosa-Sinensis, Hibiscus Mutabilis, Hibiscus Esculentus, Hibiscus

Tiliaceae, Hibiscus Syriacus and Hibiscus Moschentos.
Hybrid species of hibiscus in Malaysia include the Aloha and Pukoonis varieties.
The names of Malaysia's former Prime Minister and his wife were also

bestowed on another species of hibiscus, namely Hibiscus Rosa-Sinensis Dr Mahathir and Dr Siti Hasmah.
In 1989, the Hibiscus Garden, located in the Perdana Botanical Garden, Kuala Lumpur was set up specifically to recognise the hibiscus as our national flower.
The 0.9ha-area was planted with 5,000 hibiscus trees consisting of various species and variations.
Source: National Landscape Department

Petals of principles

The hibiscus has been Malaysia's national flower since July 28, 1960, after being declared so by the nation's first Prime Minister, Tunku Abdul Rahman Putra Al-Haj. The flower defeated other candidates for this spot, including the jasmine, lotus and rose, after a study was conducted to get public feedback on this matter. In the end, the government decided on the hibiscus, which was already well-known among the people as "bunga raya" throughout the country and admired for its interesting shape. Most importantly, it wasn't the national flower of any other country in the world at that time. The red variant of the flower was chosen specifically, as the colour is part of the Malaysian flag. "It also symbolises courage, life, and the rapid growth of Malaysia. The five petals represent the five National Principles, or the Rukun Negara, of Malaysia," Rotina explains. "As an inspiration in shaping our national identity, we can find its image on our National Coat of Arms, logos, badges, flags, embroidery, stamps, housing estates, roads, buildings and currency," she adds. Rotina suggests that the hospitality and

tourism industry can play its role in promoting the hibiscus to foreign visitors by using the flower as part of its landscaping and experience for guests. "Just like how the people in Hawaii put flowers behind their ears, we should also be proud to display our hibiscus. The blooms can also be placed on the beds of hotel guests to welcome them to our country," she says. Malaysians can also plant the hibiscus in their own homes, including those in apartments or condominiums if their units have balconies. "People in stratified buildings can plant it in pots. But as it is a plant that requires a lot of sunlight, it cannot be placed indoors," Rotina says.



The mighty merbau

Aside from the bunga raya, more effort should also be made to shine the light on our national tree, the merbau, or Malacca teak, which is indigenous to Malaysia.

The tree was named Malaysia's national tree on Aug 23, 2019, by then Prime Minister Tun Dr Mahathir Mohamad because of its strong and sturdy nature.

"The merbau is a big tree and can grow up 50m tall while its roots can be up to 4m in height. As such, it cannot be planted along roads because there will not be enough space for it and may even become a road safety hazard.

"But it is suitable for parks and other wide spaces as a meaningful green element in the landscape," Rotina says.

Moving forward, she says the department will work together with the Forestry Department to promote the merbau as a tree species which can be planted in suitable spots.

"Just like the hardy merbau, I hope all Malaysians will stay strong and unite to work together to get through this pandemic," Rotina adds, referring to sentiments many surely hold ahead of Merdeka Day on Tuesday and Malaysia Day on Sept 16.

She adds that everybody should stay united to make our nation a better place.

"We should work on improving our country in all aspects such as our economy, technological advancements, living environment and landscape. We have a country blessed not to have major natural disasters and so we should take care of it to preserve its natural beauty and cleanliness.

"But ultimately, Malaysia's beauty also lies in our diverse culture and people, who respect and care for one another," she says.

A thorny affair over Malaysia's national fruit

JUST do a Google search on the national fruit of Malaysia, and you will find results saying it is the papaya.

Shocked? At least that is how many feel, as most Malaysians tend to believe it is our much loved durian.

However, that is also wrong. Here is the truth:

"Malaysia has never declared any local fruit as our national fruit," Agriculture Department director-general Datuk Mohd Nasir Warris tells *Sunday Star*.

He was commenting on previous online posts and websites saying that papaya is the national fruit of Malaysia.

Since we will be celebrating Merdeka Day on Tuesday and Malaysia Day soon after, the time is ripe to clear the fruity air.

While we don't officially have a national fruit, Mohd Nasir says the department believes we should, and it should be none other than our thorny, irreplaceable durian.

He feels it could be treated similarly to other national symbols like the Malayan tiger and the hibiscus.

"We believe that such a national fruit should have a status like the 'king of fruits' here.

"This means that whenever this fruit is ready for harvesting,

Top 10 fruits in Malaysia (2020)

	Production in weight (metric tons)
Durian	390,635
Pineapple	323,420
Banana	313,811
Watermelon	157,054
Papaya	61,776
Rambutan	49,958
Guava (Jambu Batu)	37,881
Jackfruit (Nangka)	35,624
Cempedak	24,469
Mangosteen	23,297



Source: Agriculture Department TheStar graphics

Malaysians in general across the country, regardless of their race, culture and economic status, would be passionately looking forward to savouring it.

"Generally speaking, the fruit with such a character is the durian," Mohd Nasir says.

With its many varieties in Malaysia, he points out that the most popular is the D197 variant, otherwise known as Musang King.

Durian is also the number one fruit produced in Malaysia as at last year, with 390,635 tonnes harvested, followed by pineapple at 323,420 tonnes and bananas at 313,811 tonnes.

The department has yet to take

any action to formally establish durian as our national fruit but if it does, such a proposal must first be brought to the Cabinet for approval before it can be presented to the King for his decision.

Mohd Nasir hopes the public will view the agricultural sector as a field that can provide job opportunities for anyone.

"It is no longer deemed a career for the poor or those who are not highly educated.

"It's a business that can generate high returns for entrepreneurs and also contribute to the nation's gross domestic product," he says.

Mohd Nasir urges farmers to

place importance on food security as they have a role to play in feeding the nation.

"Malaysians should realise that the agricultural sector is one of the most important industries contributing to national prosperity and safety," he says.

He believes the public should be equipped with basic skills in agriculture so that they will be able to plant their own crops, like vegetables some of which can be harvested in about 25 days.

"These skills and knowledge will come in handy now during the pandemic or in the event of natural disasters," he adds.

The department has introduced an urban farming programme to encourage Malaysians to plant their own crops at an individual or community level to reduce their cost of living.

"This programme can also promote social interaction within the community, across different backgrounds, to produce food either for their own consumption or to be sold.

"Such efforts, even if seen as small, can have a huge impact on reducing the amount of agricultural products we import," Mohd Nasir says.

He adds that he wishes all Malaysians a happy Merdeka Day and Malaysia Day.

Our resilient Merbau tree

Common name: Merbau or Malacca teak
Scientific Name: *Intsia palembanica*
Family Name: Fabaceae
Place of Origin: Southeast Asia including Malaysia and islands in the southwest Pacific

FEATURES

- The tree can grow as tall as 50 metres.
- Its roots can grow as high as 4 metres.
- The tree trunk is straight, with a white and brownish colour.
- The diameter of the tree trunk can be as long as 1.5 metres.
- Its leaves are thick and shiny with an oblong shape, while its flowers are yellowish white.
- The merbau has fruits that are flat and oblong-shaped, and are dark brown when ripe.

USAGE

- The tree is known for its high quality hard wood, which can withstand termite attacks.
- As it is resistant to water, the wood can be used to make boats and as building materials.
- It is also popular as a material to make floorboards, including the floor in swimming pools as it does not rot easily.
- The beautiful golden spots along the wood grains also makes it suitable to be turned into ornaments, decorations or home furnishings like tables and chairs.
- Extract from the leaves of the tree is used in traditional medicine, while its young fruits can be eaten after being roasted or boiled.

Source: National Landscape Department

To be a developed country

By KIM SEONG-KON

THE news that the United Nations Conference on Trade and Development recently upgraded South Korea from a "developing country" to a "developed country" elated the Korean people greatly.

Although the new title may not sound particularly fancy and South Korea may have been a developed country for some time already, Koreans still appreciate the official recognition.

Indeed, South Korea has come a long way to earn the honourable title from a poverty-stricken post-war country in the 1950s. Surely, it is the outcome of the Korean people's conscientious hard work and indispensable help from our allies and friends overseas.

Nevertheless, we cannot simply enjoy the new title. A new status always entails responsibilities, integrity and dignity. This means, among other things, that we should actively help developing countries, especially through foreign aid programmes administered by the UN.

As a developed country, we also must cooperate with other developed countries to protect the world from global threats such as climate change, air pollution, pandemics, or terrorism.

Furthermore, there is a plethora of prerequisites for a developed country, as the term "developed" encompasses much more than simply being "economically developed."

For example, a developed country should nurture and promote liberal democracy. If liberal democracy is denounced within a country, we can scarcely continue to call it a "developed" country.

An advanced country adopts the "rule of law," not "rule by law," which is the tool of tyrants. The rule of law is an important marker of liberal democracy.

The government in a developed country does not and cannot

manipulate its citizens, or put them under surveillance under any circumstances. Indeed, that is why developed countries have such considerable difficulty containing a global pandemic such as Covid-19. If a country does superbly well in quarantine, it is often the case that the country is close to an authoritarian or totalitarian society.

A developed country also does not infringe upon the freedom of the press. If the government tries to impose censorship of the press under any circumstances, the country is far from a developed one.

The same thing goes for freedom of speech. In any advanced country, people can criticise the government freely without being intimidated. Therefore, if a columnist has to exercise self-censorship when writing for a newspaper, it means he does not live in a developed country.

If elected politicians seek revenge on their political foes and imprison them every five years, it cannot be a developed country either.

If every new administration reinterprets our nation's history according to its political ideology, it also means we still live in an underdeveloped country.

George Orwell once said, "The most effective way to destroy people is to deny and obliterate their own understanding of their history."

Watching what had been happening in South Korea, a foreign intellectual recently admonished, "If history is interpreted differently every five years, I wonder how we will know where we came from and where we are heading to."

If politicians tamper with historical facts, we will be lost in history forever and never be able to soar into the future.

Furthermore, the people in a developed country should be generous and tolerant toward other

people and other nations.

They should have the capacity to embrace other cultures and different opinions, too. If they are hostile to minority cultures and foreign customs, they are not yet ready to be a developed country.

If they foster anti-foreign sentiments, denounce multiculturalism or claim homogeneity, it means they do not live in a developed country either. If they do not tolerate different opinions, they are still living in a developing or underdeveloped country.

A developed country should always exhibit decency and integrity. It will not frivolously ruin its relationship with foreign countries due to grudges, emotional overflows or political gain.

Unfortunately, people are prone to emotional outbursts and amateurish politicians can irrevocably damage relationships with foreign countries. If that happens, the country will lose respect from the international community. If a country cannot gain international esteem and trust, it cannot be a developed country.

In a developed country, the government does not control everything. Thus, big enterprises can concentrate on their business without interference from the government, and citizens, too, can enjoy freedom and autonomy.

If so, economic prosperity will surely come and people will be happy and content as well, enjoying high quality lives. Only in underdeveloped, totalitarian countries does big government try to manipulate everything.

Becoming an economically developed country is not easy. Being a fully advanced country in every respect is even more difficult.

Still, however, we should strive to be the one that deserves the title, a "developed country." Only then, can we become a truly advanced country. - The Korea Herald/ANN