

# GARDEN OF BLISS

Whether seeking solace from the clamour of urban life or to invigorate jaded senses, the Singapore Botanic Gardens is nature's haven in a city. By **Valerie Chew**.

A

glorious morning. Perfect for a stroll in the Singapore Botanic Gardens. With the sun beaming and the air wafting fresh and sweet, it's a luxury just to be out in the open. The colourful flowers and gleeful shrieks of children running around revive even the weariest of spirits.



Joggers and tourists appear to be recharged by the natural, immaculate surroundings. Groups of people engaging in exercise seek refuge in the welcome shade the lush trees and foliage provide. Babies in strollers squeal in contentment as mothers walk them along the lakes and pockets of greenery.

Today an oasis of recreation and natural splendour, the beginnings of the Botanic Gardens were actually more economic in nature. It started off as an experimental garden by Sir Stamford Raffles, founder of Singapore, engaged in the cultivation of crops such as cocoa and nutmeg. It was also the birthplace of the rubber industry in the region. Even now, the Gardens remains an important centre for tropical botanical and horticultural research, education and conservation.

Established in 1859 at its present location, the Singapore Botanic Gardens boasts a spectacular collection of more than 10,000 types of plants, which come in a multitude of brilliant shades, textures and scents. It's a horticultural feast for the senses.

## BOTANY CENTRE

Visitors who enter from the Napier Road entrance are given a grand reception by a majestic, ornate gate. Also known as the Tanglin Gate, its design features an intricate pattern of leaves and flowers. After passing the gate, the Botany Centre awaits with its new education and research facilities. Given a face-lift recently, it now houses laboratories and heritage collections of the herbarium. A Public Reference Centre is also offered at the Library of Botany and Horticulture. People now have access to reference materials that include books, magazines, CDs as well as herbarium specimens.

Other enhanced visitors' amenities include a new entrance plaza, a basement car park, and a food garden. The famous Taman Serasi Food Garden was originally located just across and outside the Gardens. The redevelopment of this core area has improved aesthetics, with added landscape features such as the Saraca Stream Walk, the green pavilion, vertical green walls, sculptures and other soothing water features.



Tanglin Gate: main entrance of the Singapore Botanic Gardens.



## ART SCULPTURES

If a picture paints a thousand words, then a sculpture can say so much more. Meaning, history and even motion is contained in a sculpture. In the Gardens, sculptures enhance the landscape by lending depth to the surroundings. Three bronze sculptures: *Girl on a Swing*, *Girl on a Bicycle*, and *Lady on a Hammock* were gifts to the Gardens by David Marshall, former Singapore Ambassador to France, Spain and Portugal, respectively. Crafted by British sculptor Sydney Harpley, these bronze pieces symbolise youth and the fun of living. Another sculpture that stands amongst the greenery is *Swing Me Mama*. Inspired when she was swinging her kids, Dominic Benhura sculpted *Swing Me Mama* in 1995 using serpentine (spring stone). And overlooking Swan Lake is *Joy*, a figure of a mother holding her child high in the air. Each telling a story of its own, these sculptures embody the most basic of human desires: happiness and peace.



*Swing Me Mama* by sculptor Dominic Benhura.

## SWAN LAKE

The Swan Lake, as its name suggests, is home to a pair of swans imported from Amsterdam. Like stars on show, the swans often take the spotlight one after the other, emerging from the island of palms. Added as a feature in 1866, the Swan Lake is an important water supply for the Gardens. For the weary, seek shelter at The Swan Lake Gazebo, a Victorian cast-iron garden shelter.





## ECO-GARDEN

With a lake reflecting the clouds in its waters, and lazy black swans gliding by, this 'rear end' of the Gardens, bordering Cluny Park Road and Bukit Timah Road, is tranquil and undisturbed. Besides the beautiful lake, this area also contains colourful fruit trees: mango, rambutan, butterfruit and chempedak, among others. Nut trees, medicinal plants and beverage crops such as coffee and cocoa are also found here.

The Children's Garden, presently under construction, is an extension of the Eco-Garden worth waiting for. Designed to evoke curiosity and creativity, it aims to teach children about the importance of plants and conservation through play and exploration. The first garden of its kind in Asia, it hopes to stimulate a sense of wonder in inquisitive young minds.

## GINGER GARDEN

Did you know that bananas are relatives of the ginger family? With tastes and textures so disparate, this association seems dubious; but, if viewed under the umbrella of non-woody plants, then this affiliation makes sense. The one-hectare Ginger Garden contains more than 250 species from the family *Zingiberaceae*. Besides bananas, there are heliconias, prayer plants, cannas, and a little known family member called *Lowiaceae* which has orchid-like flowers. A trip around the Ginger Garden not only ignites your sense of sight and smell, it also brings music to the ears with the therapeutic resonance of cascading water from the Ginger Falls.



## HERITAGE TREES

Serving as natural landmarks, trees deliver a sense of permanence and identity to a place. It takes decades for trees to mature and as Singapore progresses, there is a danger of losing these trees. In view of this, the Heritage Trees Scheme was established with the objective to conserve. Eleven trees in the Singapore Botanic Gardens were selected as National Heritage Trees in August 2002. Among them, *Terminalia subspathulata*, also known as *Jelawi* or *Malayan terminalia*, is the tallest tree, standing at 47metres; it bears spreading buttresses and wears a wide conical, flat-topped crown. Though enormous, the tree has small leaves with a tinge of blue on the underside. Set in rosettes, the leaves are like accessories complimenting an already stunning accoutrement.





## SYMPHONY LAKE

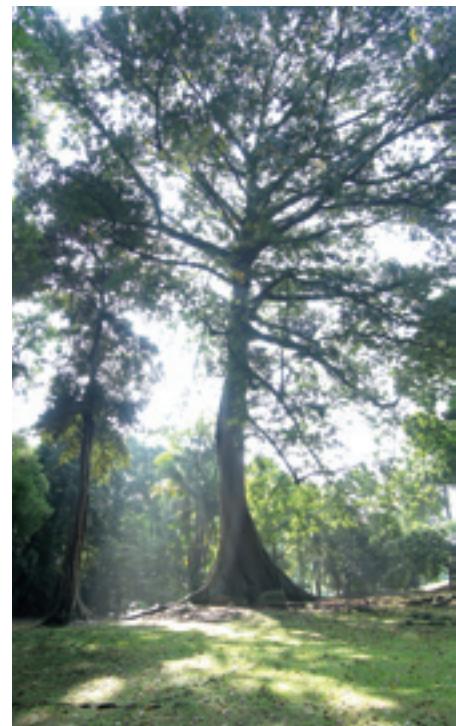
Also known as Shaw Foundation Symphony Stage, Symphony Lake has been a favourite venue in the Botanic Gardens since the 1990s. Inspired by its beautiful setting in the Palm Valley, the design of the Shaw Foundation Symphony Stage mirrors the grandeur of flowers and leaves in the garden. The shape of the roof resembles a petal;

while its ribbed texture, veins on leaves. A crowd puller, this spot is a key venue for an assortment of concerts and performances. These are held monthly and cover diverse genres, from jazz, Latin and light classics to pop, R&B, Bollywood tunes and Chinese orchestral music.

## RAINFOREST

The crisp cool breath of the forest greets you the moment you enter, its dense canopy acting as a shield from the blazing sun. The rainforest section is a welcome respite from the heat, with trees hovering at 40 metres, reminding us of how small we really are in the kingdom of plants. If our urbanised landscape gives the impression that the whole of Singapore has been completely transformed, the rainforest will have you realise that it is perhaps one of a rare few original pockets of jungle left on the island. With trees that stand witness to the arrival of Raffles, the Rainforest is a six-hectare fragment of primeval forest where 314 species of herbs, ferns, shrubs, climbers and trees of varying sizes, rendezvous. When it comes to getting close to nature, this is as close as it gets.

*Rainforest Tours are conducted in English, Japanese and Mandarin.*



## VISITOR CENTRE

Smack in the middle where the old and new segments of the Gardens meet, the Visitor Centre accommodates the new headquarters of the National Parks Board, and the Visitor Services Unit with its distinctive information desk. Its architecture reflects Southeast Asian designs, consisting of timber trusses and cedar shales roofing. The Visitor Centre is equipped with linked walkways, a landscaped plaza, water cascades and facilities such as car and coach parking.

Flanking the plaza is the Botanic Gardens Shop and Café les Amis, the latter serving local and western fare. If you prefer a more exclusive dining experience, walk a few metres towards the Symphony Lake and you will discover Au Jardin les Amis, a fine dining restaurant offering delectable French cuisine.



Water cascades at the Visitor Centre.





## NATIONAL ORCHID GARDEN

What is a visit to the Singapore Botanic Gardens without a stop at the National Orchid Garden? A trademark of the Gardens and a symbol of Singapore, the orchid is a flower that has been given the highest accolade. This is evident from the VIP section where special hybrids are named after visiting state dignitaries and other important guests. To date, the Gardens has named over 100 VIP orchids. These include: *Dendrobium Margaret Thatcher*, *Dendrobium Memoria Princess Diana* and *Vandaenopsis Nelson Mandela*, amongst others. Of course, the national flower of Singapore, *Vanda Miss Joaquim*, can also be found here.

Check out also the carnivorous plants in the Cool House, an enclosure filled with intriguing plant varieties and equipped with cool air, mist and rushing torrents—all specially installed to recreate the experience of high elevation sites in the tropics.



Photo courtesy of Singapore Botanic Gardens

## EVOLUTION GARDEN

Standing in sharp contrast to the general lush greenery, the Evolution Garden is akin to a walk through time. Its meandering trail begins with a hot and arid area. Huge columns of 'stone' flank the entrance. Essentially, these 'Trees of Stone' are petrified tree trunks: the preserved, fossilised remains of actual ancient trees. Then there are the coral-like structures, known as *Lepidodendrons*, that claim credit as predecessors to trees of today. Some 4,600 million years ago, life as we know did not exist on Earth till the introduction of plants, which give off oxygen and hence, birth to a whole new world. This journey helps us appreciate the vital presence of plants on our planet. ■

*A tour of the Evolution Garden takes place at 9am every first and fourth Saturday of the month.*

*Singapore Botanic Gardens is located at 1 Cluny Road. Free entry except for the National Orchid Garden (\$5 adults, \$1 students and senior citizens). Free entry for children below 12 years. Tel: (65) 6471 7361.*