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Botanist extraordinaire: Dr Francis Ng holding up the plaque which honoured his long dedication to the world of plants.

Flora lover

A lifetime dedicated to studying plants has not gone unnoticed for this botanist, who recently received a prestigious award for his work.

HILARY CHIEW

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IF you ask Dr Francis S.P. Ng the name of any trees in this country, chances are he will be able to answer you. And he might even tell you where the herbarium specimens are kept.

Such is the depth of his knowledge for he is one of the handful of local botanists who have toiled for a quarter century surveying 2,800 species of trees, all of which are documented in the four-volume *Tree Flora of Malaya*.

Working alongside his mentor, the late Dr Tim C. Whitmore who had edited the first two volumes that were published in 1972, Ng edited the last two volumes which were published in 1978 and 1989.

He belongs to the pioneer corp of local foresters who gradually took over the management and research work at the Forest Research Institute of Malaysia (FRIM) from their English predecessors in the years after independence in 1957.

Under the Colombo Plan for economic and social advancement of the peoples of South and South-East Asia, Ng received a scholarship to pursue his botanical degree at the University of Tasmania. He joined FRIM upon graduation in 1964. Four years later, again sponsored by the Colombo Plan, he left for the University of Oxford where he based his thesis on the biological studies of the Ebenaceae, a family of 500 species of flowering trees and shrubs which include ebony and persimmon.

"Malaysia is the only independent country ever to finish a tree inventory," reveals the botanist.

"The process of Malayanisation, as it was called, spanned 1957 to 1965. Subsequently, Malaysia continued to receive support from rich countries in the Commonwealth group such as Britain, Australia, Canada and New Zealand," he explains.

During that period, foreign experts were also sent to work and train locals in the former colony and FRIM benefited from experienced foresters who willingly imparted their skills and knowledge to develop a forestry management system for the country.

Recalling the extensive and ambitious *Tree Flora of Malaya*, Ng says the project spanned his entire career at FRIM.

"In those days, we were prepared to spend our lifetime exploring and dedicated to one single mission. Nowadays, scientists don't harbour that big an ambition. Nobody will invest their lifetime doing one piece of work.

"With the new funding mechanism, researchers tend to think short-term. They do small projects and wait for funding. (In a way,) the prevailing funding mechanism has changed the scientific mentality (for the worse) and stifled good research," he opines.

Ng's interests in plants began when he was a young boy growing up in Kampung Simee in the outskirts of Ipoh. His family had built their house on the prescribed 360sqm of land given by the government to each resettled Chinese family during the Emergency period.

Like most settlers, his family grew edible plants. In his secondary school days, Ng was an active Scout and often explored the jungle which earned him one of the merit badges, the forester badge. Autobiographies of great people like Thomas Edison and Albert Einstein inspired and nurtured Ng's dream of becoming a scientist.

"By the 20th century, all the physical discoveries have been accomplished. The only discoveries that can be had were in the botanical arena," says Ng who retired from FRIM in 1989 as its deputy director-general.

He later headed the forest research and training branch of the Food and Agriculture Organisation from 1991 to 1994 and was director of the research division at the Centre for International Forestry Research between 1994 and 1997.

His dedication to botany recently earned him the David Fairchild Medal for Plant Exploration, making him the first Malaysian to be listed on the esteemed list that includes other luminaries like Sir Gillian Prance, the former director of the Royal Botanical Gardens at Kew, renowned for his ethno-botanical study of the Brazilian nut in the Amazon forests.

Ng, 68, is instrumental in the *ex-situ* conservation to save the rare Malaysian witch hazel (*Maingaya malayana*), the only species of its genus and until recently known only from two herbarium specimens collected a century ago.

In 1971, upon returning from Oxford, Ng collected three seeds of the Malaysian witch hazel from one tree in Penang and planted them on FRIM grounds. When the tree's rarity was noted, Ng rushed back to the place but the tree had been felled.

Ng is known for his exhaustive study of 1,000 species of tropical fruits and seeds.

The award citation noted Ng's contribution to conservation, research and exploration of Indomalaya's forest, achievements that are in the footsteps of Fairchild, an accomplished American plant collector before World War II.

As director of the Office of Foreign Seed and Plant Introduction of the United States Department of Agriculture, Fairchild introduced some 75,000 selected varieties and species of useful plants such as durum wheat, Japanese rice, Sudan grass, Chinese soybean, Chinese elm, persimmon and pistachio to the world's leading superpower.

A past recipient of the Fairchild award is Dr Ruth Kiew, a Malaysia-based English botanist renowned for her extensive work in Malaysian flora.

As someone who believes that knowledge is borderless and who appreciates the free flow of genetic resources throughout human history, Ng is concerned that recent developments governing genetics ownership under the Convention on Biological Diversity will have an adverse effect on knowledge about plants beneficial to mankind.

"The convention has rightly emphasised the need for conservation but on the flip side, barriers have come up that inhibit the sharing of these resources due to fear of bio-piracy. Now people tend to look at genetic resources as a pot of gold but without intellectual effort that goes into studying their properties and values, a plant may not have its perceived value.

"Very often, the intellectual input does not necessarily happen in the country of origin. So, if you discourage research, you risk putting an end to discovery of new knowledge," he argues.

Ng's vast knowledge in tropical plants now goes into the many consultation jobs that he has taken up. He is consultant editor for the *Journal of Tropical Forest Science*, lead consultant for the planned Natural History Museum and is also supervising the creation of a rooftop garden at 1 Utama shopping centre in Petaling Jaya.

He has published more than 140 scientific papers, books and CDs on tropical botany, including *The Tropical Garden City: Its Creation and Maintenance* and *Tropical Horticulture and Gardening*.