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Rainforest at the mall

1 Utama's latest exhibit takes gardening to new heights.
RIZAL SOLOMON writes.



Ng developed an innovative soil mix for the plants.



Teo has overseen revolutionary ideas like the Rainforest exhibit and now the Secret Garden.

THE first time you enter the 1 Utama Shopping Centre's rooftop Secret Garden is a surreal experience.

In that one location, you can find everything from desert plants thriving out in the open to tropical and temperate plants.

One walk can take you through cacti to lychee to spices and even paddy.

The unveiling of the project, which took more than half a decade, has made its creators — 1 Utama director Datuk Teo Chiang Kok and botanist Dr Francis Ng — very happy.

For them, it was a labour of love.

They started work on the project after finishing work on the Rainforest exhibit in the mall's new wing.

"We got the idea in 2002. It took about five years for the plants to mature," said Teo.

"The Rainforest came about because the new wing was facing Central Park. We thought about how we could bring the park into the building.

"After the rainforest came into being, we wanted to create something different. We, therefore, thought about starting a temperate garden," said Teo.

Because it was so experimental an idea, a sizeable chunk of time was spent on research and development. That alone took about two years.

The rooftop garden is a landmark for a variety of reasons.

The first, and most obvious, of course, is the creation of a garden with such variety

on the rooftop of a major shopping mall.

Another reason is the innovative soil mix based on granulated horticultural carbon developed by Ng.

The carbon was a key component to enabling a massive rooftop garden to be created.

The carbon soil mix also deters pests, so less pesticides are used.

The Rainforest is hard to ignore. With its massive trees and an equally large aquarium with a plethora of fish, it is a show-stopper.

"The fish is, surprisingly, easier to maintain than the plants," said Teo.

"Once we got the

water balance right, and the filter working properly ... the fish were happy. Its population has now tripled in size," he added.

Most people probably don't realise how environmentally-friendly the shopping centre is.

While it has all the grandeur of a mega-shopping mall, the philosophy behind it is that the mall should fit into its environment.

This is emphasised by the management which views the mall's impact on the environment very seriously.

The garden is among numerous environmental initiatives undertaken by the mall in the last few years.

It is also a major component of an ever-evolving plan to ensure that 1 Utama cares for the environment it sits in.

Then there are the other environmental initiatives that work hand-in-hand with more exhibits.

"We also built this big tank to collect rainwater. The rainwater has a few functions. One, we use it to cool our air conditioning plant. Two, we use it to flush all our toilets. Three, we use it to do all our landscaping and watering.

"We worked out that we had saved 40 per cent of estimated water usage over the last five years," said Teo.

"Every week, at 3am, we pump out all the stale air in the shopping centre. This is the time when the air

outside is at its coolest and the coolest possible fresh air comes in. That's among the things we do to keep the place environmentally friendly and healthy," he added.

Meanwhile the jovial, instantly likable Ng is a former deputy director-general of the Forest Research Institute of Malaysia (FRIM) and something of a legend in Malaysian botanical circles, thanks to his vast knowledge.

He was recently awarded the prestigious David Fairchild Medal 2009 for Plant Exploration.

To date, he is the only Malaysian to have ever been awarded that medal. His passion for the country's rich biodiversity is undeniable.

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■ The Secret Garden is open to visitors from 10am to 6pm every Saturday and Sunday.

Admission is free but the number of visitors at any one time is limited to maintain the garden's serenity.

Tickets to the garden can be obtained at the Customer Service Centre on the ground floor Highstreet. You can also pick up a map of the garden at the customer service.

■ Log on to www.nst.com.my to see a video walkthrough of 1 Utama's Secret Garden.

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The 1 Utama Secret Garden is home to 500 species of rare and beautiful plants.