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Woored by plants

Two staff members of the Forest Research Institute Malaysia (FRIM) did the country proud when they won awards at the International Union of Forest Research Organisations World Congress in Seoul last month. theSun's NATALIE HENG caught up with them to find out more about their work.

PERAK-BORN Dr Nor Azah Ali has always loved plants, but when she received a government scholarship to go to the University of Waterloo in Canada during the 80s it was not for biology but chemistry.

"I loved hiking and walking the conservation trails and national parks, discovering all kinds of new flowers and plants," she reminisced.

Her career as a scientist did not diminish her passion for flora and she later ingeniously found a way to combine both interests by becoming a specialist in natural product chemistry.

In her laboratory which she referred to as her *jantung* (heart), where for the past 23 years she has investigated all kinds of new plant extracts, she explained her work.

Since beginning her career at FRIM in the 80s she has been at the forefront of uncovering the mysteries of Malaysia's biological treasure chest, analysing and categorising the chemical constituents in these extracts to discover potential new active compounds that may be of medical or commercial use.

"Over the years we have investigated more than 120 species of plants from which we analysed more than 200 essential oils, she said.

In her office she spread an array of multi-shaped bottles containing the fruits of her labour since she became head of the FRIM herbal development programme.

She has so far won no fewer than 12



innovation awards for her work.

"This one is made from lemongrass," she said, showing me a bottle of body gel with 'Serai Wangi Aromatherapy' written on the label.

"It was part of a product range we worked on and which has been taken to market by a company called Syarikat Minyak AFIA T Sdn Bhd."

The department has come a long way since the 80s; the herbal development programme is focused on harnessing Malaysia's untapped natural resources and turning them into viable products.

Another product that was recently launched

is Yaqin's herbal insect repellent, available at selected Tesco outlets which Nor said is a citronella-based air freshener with insect repellent qualities.

Another major project Nor is working on relates to the lucrative business of *Agarwood*.

The resinous hardwood, also commonly known as *gaharu*, fetches between RM4000 and RM20,000 per kg due to its popular uses in medicines, perfumes and incense.

"We are carrying out a few projects, one on the inducement technique, product development and quality control," says Nor.

The catch to the *gaharu* industry is that the *Aquilaria* tree has been over-harvested, resulting in the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora (CITES) listing it as a potentially threatened species.

This has led to numerous commercial ventures in farming *Aquilaria* trees, inducing them to produce the resin through inoculation techniques.

The quality of *gaharu* produced this way has not been as good as the natural product, which could explain why the products are usually not graded.

Nor said the reason commercially produced *gaharu* tends to be of an inferior quality could be due to inefficiencies in the inoculation technique or farmers harvesting the trees too early.