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# How Sungei Buloh became the horticultural hub of Malaysia



**Interactions**  
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GARDENERS all over Malaysia know of Sungei Buloh as the hub of horticulture in Malaysia. Centred on the grounds of the old leprosy hospital and settlement, Sg Buloh has, in the past 50 years, become the place to see what is new and available in garden plants.

In the early years of the 20th century, lepers were sent into exile to islands such as Pangkor Laut and Pulau Jerejak. In 1930, the hospital and settlement in Sg Buloh were established by the government of British Malaya to serve as a central facility to treat and house leprosy patients and the island settlements were gradually closed.

The patients lived in simple one-room duplex houses with a bit of land around each house on which they could grow vegetable and keep chickens. The patients and their families had practically no prospects of getting out and re-integrating with society at large.

By the 1950s the doctors were confident that leprosy had been beaten medically, but social acceptance of cured patients posed a huge problem. Then John Wyatt-Smith

of the Forest Research Institute at Kepong a few miles down the road decided to do something about it. He arranged for about 30 able-bodied men from the settlement to be employed at the institute (now Forest Reserve Institute of Malaysia or FRIM). This was no small undertaking.

No other organisation was willing to offer employment. FRIM was able to take the lead because John Wyatt-Smith was such a respected and towering figure at the institute and the forest department.

When I joined FRIM in 1964, Wyatt-Smith had just retired, but the men from Sg Buloh had become indispensable. They did all the toughest jobs, moving heavy loads, felling trees, clearing land, and looking after the plant nursery.

In the process they earned the respect of their co-workers. Those

not employed by the institute were encouraged by the hospital to take up the growing of ornamental plants, to sell by the roadside in front of their houses.

Slowly overcoming their fears, people in KL began to go to Sg Buloh to buy plants, because such plants were cheap compared with elsewhere. In the 1970s, the hospital organised a garden show, in which Lam Peng Sam and I were the judges.

My nurseryman at FRIM was Mat Isa bin Bulat. He died a few months ago, by then a highly successful

businessman and living in a big bungalow in Sg Buloh. As a youth in Langkawi, Mat Isa's world crashed when he was diagnosed with leprosy. Sent to Sg Buloh for treatment, he was one of those selected to work in FRIM. I was at that time making an encyclopaedic survey of fruits, seeds and seedlings of forest trees.

This work would eventually be published in two thick volumes and become the reference textbook for those in the business of raising forest trees. At that time no such business existed.

Mat Isa looked after the hundreds of species of forest trees that I was raising, learning to recognise all the plants and their names. He learnt not only their Malay names but also their scientific names (Greek and Latin to most people) from the labels I attached to the plants. Then one day, he shocked everybody by announcing his resignation to go into business.

Kuala Lumpur was taking up urban greening in a big way and there was a willingness to try new species of trees from the forests. Mat Isa saw his opportunity. He could recognise and name hundreds of species of forest trees by their local as well as their scientific names. He rented land from his neighbours to set up nurseries in Sg Buloh, and was able to supply the growing demand.

I did not know how he was progressing until some years later when he overtook me on the road to FRIM and waved cheerily. He was driving a Mercedes while was I driving my Datsun.

On another day, while having a drink with him in a kopitiam he told me how he had just lost a large

sum of money. It was stolen from his car when he had stopped for lunch after withdrawing the money to pay salaries. It was something like RM 20,000. 'Did you report to the police?' He merely shrugged and said "what's the point". I guess when one has been through what Mat Isa has been through, the loss of RM 20,000 is not such a big disaster.

Over the years, Sg Buloh has become the centre of a highly innovative network of self-made men and women engaged in the horticultural business in Malaysia. This network keeps thousands of people employed, not only in Sg Buloh but also in feeder nurseries outside KL, and as far as Cameron Highlands and Muar. New flower varieties are usually first offered in Sg Buloh before they appear elsewhere.

From its original hub at the hospital area, flower nurseries have been established in the surrounding area. Sg Buloh provides a good example of how the best commercial or industrial hubs come into existence 'organically' through time. It requires the interaction of many individuals, in unique ways, in some unique place.

Such a hub can be easily destroyed but not easily duplicated elsewhere. As an example of how planned hubs can fall short, we have the so-called 'green lane' on the road from the Sg Buloh junction to the Rubber Research Institute. All along one side of the road, the land has been divided and let out to nurseries, but such nurseries are strung out for several miles, and the road has become a noisy, busy highway.

It is unpleasant to walk from one nursery to the next and dangerous to park and re-park on the roadside. It is also impossible to turn back. At the historic hospital hub, one can visit a large number of different nurseries within a small area, in peace and quiet. Now that leprosy and been beaten and its hospital relegated to history, the horticultural hub and its historical buildings, especially the one-room duplex houses, survives as a reminder of a huge human tragedy overcome by human determination. The Malaysian horticulture industry will suffer a serious setback if its Sg Buloh hub is lost.

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