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STANDING TALL

Forest Research Institute Malaysia's arborist says trees in the urban landscape have it tough → PAGES 6/7

Understanding challenges faced by trees in the city

VITAL SUPPORT: FRIM to sign MoU with City Hall to impart knowledge on tree maintenance

NURADZIMMAH DAIM

IT is challenging to be a tree in an urban landscape. Arborist Adnan Mohamad from the Forest Research Institute Malaysia (FRIM) said while most trees are self-reliant in the wild, they are exposed to elements in the city that are not natural for them.

"In an urban surrounding, the trees are exposed to not only air pollution from vehicles, but also human disturbance as well as limited space for their growth. This is especially true for trees that are planted on road shoulders. If not given ample space for the growth of their roots, for instance, they might grow sick and deformed, and even be a safety hazard," said Adnan, who is also

in charge of the botanical garden in the institute in Kepong, here.

"In contrast, those in the woods are self-reliant due to the eco-cycle that includes fallen leaves which serve as natural fertiliser and sufficient space for their roots to grow. In the city, the space is not only limited, but the growth is not as natural because of the cemented pavement."

To Adnan, there is no such thing as good or bad trees, only trees that were either thoughtfully selected or poorly chosen for a particular site.

"This is where we can provide the support so that the trees can serve their purpose and benefit everyone. We can

start even before they are planted, with the right planning involved."

He said the foremost principle would be to plant the right tree at the right place, according to the species' characteristics (*see accompanying story*).

"Not all trees are appropriate for all settings. Apart from planning the types, the seeds and saplings must also be selected and only the best should be planted. There are trees that are more prone to certain diseases. For instance, pine trees are more prone to termite infestation than other species.

"For hardy trees like Khaya and Merawan Siput Jantan, we must provide space in between saplings when we plant them. Most trees need to be about

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nine metres apart so that when they grow to maturity, they will not cause problems such as slanting trunks that not only cause the landscape to be distorted, but also cause obstruction to pedestrians and motorists," he said.

"More often than not, trees that are three to 4.5 metres tall are planted close together in a narrow green verge, which may look perfect now but may dominate road shoulder, overpower side drain, clogging the sewer and even cause problems with overhead power lines. They may become too dangerous to be left unchecked."

He said it would be better to diversify the tree species planted in the city, rather than focusing on certain types. He pointed out that the trees planted in the past were bogged down with problems like diseases, causing them to weaken and get uprooted or having their branches break before being pruned.

"Among those identified being currently problematic in Kuala Lumpur are the Angsana and Khaya trees. In a more natural surrounding, they can live long and healthy, but with disturbances like the laying of underground cables, they succumbed to these elements while fighting for their survival. As a result, you will see uprooted and termite-infested trees."

Adnan said that increasing the quan-

tity was not as important as caring for the existing number.

"We can plant as many trees as we want, but without proper supervision and maintenance, the trees will only cause problems later and need to be replaced with new ones. When planting trees, we have to consider the tree's growth without compromising public safety. In Singapore, people prefer to drive or walk under trees and they don't have to worry about their safety, thanks to the systematic maintenance carried out by the authorities there.

"If we provide the necessary support, including a six-monthly check by tree experts and fertilising exercise once a year, that will help reduce the number of sick trees as we can detect any problem early and suggest the right treatment. This will not only benefit the public as the trees are strong and reliable, but also help to reduce the unnecessary cost to remove them and planting new saplings to replace them."

He said supervision can be carried out as early as a tree achieves its adolescent, about five to six years.

"With routine checks, the public will be more confident and rest assured that the trees are well taken care of and not pose danger to them.

"A common mistake by local authorities when planting trees is to leave them to grow by themselves until they notice that they were infested or when receiving public complaint. This normally happens when the trees are all grown up. If the trees are checked at

least once a year, we can at least handle symptoms at an early stage, so when the time they reaches maturity age (after 10 to 20 years), it will not give prob-

lems and are able to serve their functions such as shades, provide fresh air, cool the temperature, while providing a nice landscape of forest trees in the city."

The other, he said, is treating the trees using improper methods and technique.

"You could see trees being pruned to the point that not a single leave is left, which is not the right way. The current maintenance practice is to trim branches after receiving public complaints, rather than focusing on the needs and health of the trees. If the trees are healthy and strong, there will be fewer problems which means less cost needed for maintenance and will not become hazardous to the public."

Apart from enhancing the plant's appearance, pruning also help to remove dead or dying branches injured by disease, severe insect infestation, storms, or other damages caused by machines.

He added to address these shortcomings, FRIM is expected to sign a memorandum of understanding (MoU) with City Hall to impart more knowledge on caring for trees in the city and landscaping this year.

"It is hoped with the MoU, council staff will have better understanding of the trees and encourage other local authorities to adopt proper tree maintenance as part of their urban landscaping practice."

"With routine checks, the public will be more confident and rest assured that the trees are well taken care of and not pose danger to them."

Adnan Mohamad,
Arborist from Forest Research
Institute Malaysia (FRIM)

Types of trees in Kuala Lumpur and their characteristics

- **Angsana or Sena (*Pterocarpus indicus*):** Can grow between 30 and 48 metres high and trunk diameter of up to two metres. They are normally resilient to termite infestation.
- **Bucida:** The branches are typically horizontal giving it a layered appearance, with tiny leaves. Medium-sized tree, it is known for its termite-resistant dry wood.
- **Khaya:** Originated from Africa, the large evergreen tree is good for providing shades; grow up to 35 metres

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high; older trees are resistant to fire while seedlings are fairly susceptible.

● **Merawan Siput Jantan (Hopeo odorata):** Large tree species commonly for shades; reaching up to 45 metres in height with the base of the trunk could reach a 4.5 metres diameter.

● **Penaga Lilin (Mesua Ferrea L.):** Native to tropical parts of Asia, this hardy and strong tree is cultivated as ornamental plants because of its pink to red flush of drooping young leaves and fragrant white flowers. It grows up to 30 metres tall and with the trunk up to two metres in diameter.

● **Pokok Hujan-hujan or Rain tree (Albizia saman):** Originated from South America; large ornamental tree which can reach a height of 25 metres and a diameter of four metres, with symmetrical, spreading crown which is beautiful in any park or garden setting to provide shade while still allowing rain drops to reach plants below.

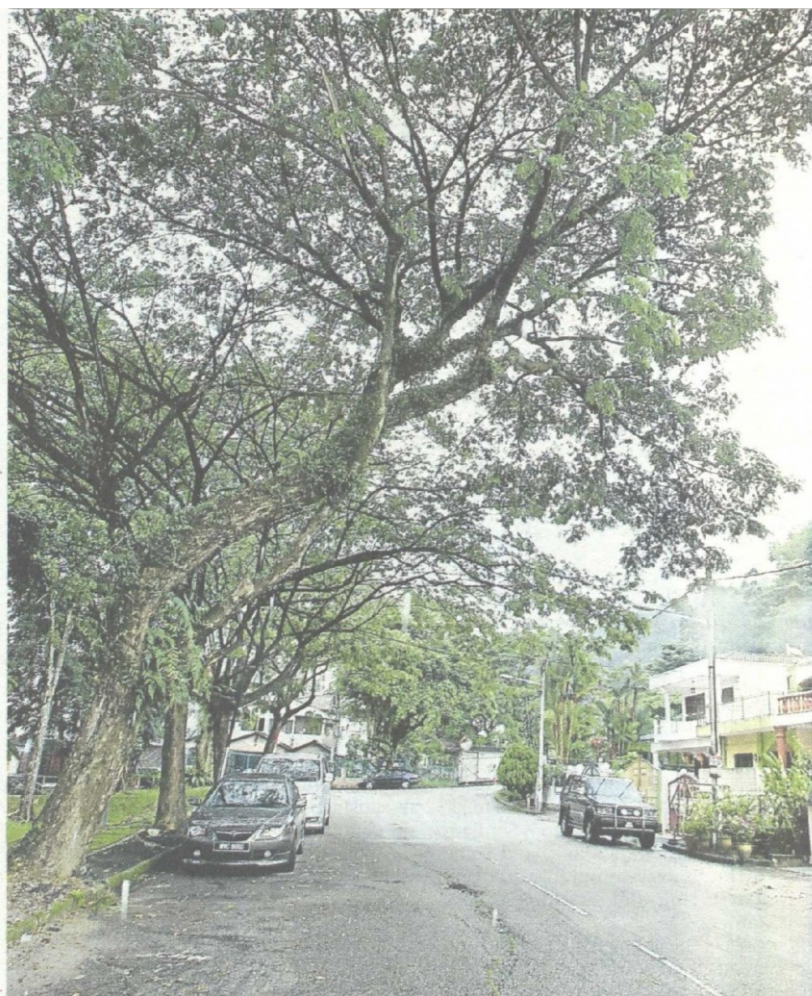
● **Ketapang:** It grows to 35 metres tall, with an upright, symmetrical crown and horizontal branches with large leaves. As the tree gets older, its crown becomes more flattened to form a spreading, vase shape.



Angsana is normally resilient to termite attacks.



Ketapang tree, also known as sea almond.



Mature trees need to be inspected at least once a year to ensure that they are healthy and will not pose a danger to residents.

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With proper maintenance, trees would go healthier and stronger thus reduce number of fallen trees. Pix by Izhari Ariffin, Izhari Ariffin, Syarafiq Abd Samad and Mohd Yusni Ariffin.

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Trees with problems such as this one must be attended to immediately or it could be hazardous to the public.



Pruning is needed to remove dead or dying branches affected by disease, severe insect infestation, storms or damaged by machines.

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Different trees have different characteristics but with common purpose to enhance city landscape.