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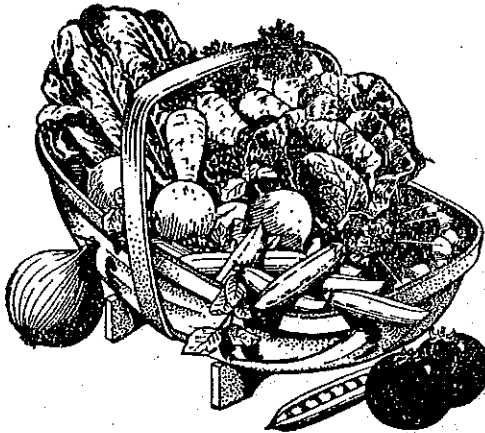
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CONTENTS

	Page
EDITORIAL	510
S. W. McLEOD BRAGGINS (PRESIDENT, 1946-47)	511
ANNUAL GENERAL MEETING, 1946	513
BALANCE SHEETS	516
MUTUAL IMPROVEMENT SOCIETY, 1945/46	519
KEW METEOROLOGICAL NOTES, 1946	521
JOHN RICHARDSON (PRESIDENT, 1947/48)	522
ANNUAL REPORT, 1947	523
ANNUAL GENERAL MEETING, 1947	524
MUTUAL IMPROVEMENT SOCIETY, 1946/47	526
REPORT, LAWN TENNIS CLUB, 1947	528
WEDDING BELLS	529
PERSONAL	529
KEW METEOROLOGICAL NOTES, 1947	534
NOTES AND GLEANINGS	535
BEQUEST TO THE KEW GUILD	537
THE ASSOCIATION OF KEW GARDENERS IN AMERICA	538
VOCATIONAL TRAINING SCHEME	539
EXTRACTS FROM LETTERS	540
REMINISCENCES OF AN OLD KEWITE	541
RAMBLINGS OF AN OLD KEWITE	544
GLORY OF A GARDEN	549
THE GARDENS' BELL	550
RAILWAY HORTICULTURAL ACTIVITIES IN SOUTH AFRICA	550
AN AMERICAN SOLDIER IN AN ENGLISH GARDEN	555
FIRST IMPRESSIONS OF WESTERN AUSTRALIAN FLORA	558
PETER GOOD	561
IMPRESSIONS OF KEW	564
KEWITES IN QUEENSLAND	565
HORTICULTURE IN FILMLAND	567
B.B.C. AT KEW	570
THE SOCIETY OF JERSEY GARDENERS	571
BRITAIN ERASES SCARS OF BLITZ IN RESTORATION OF KEW GARDENS	573
HISTORY OF THE BOTANIC GARDENS, PENANG	575
GERMAN OCCUPATION OF THE ISLAND OF JERSEY	580
AN APPRECIATION RE THE LATE MR. T. W. BRISCOE	589
IN MEMORIAM	590
KEW STAFF (DECEMBER, 1947)	604
DIRECTORY OF OLD KEWITES	608
RULES OF THE KEW GUILD	635

HISTORY OF THE BOTANIC GARDENS, PENANG

It is interesting to trace the history of the Botanic Gardens in the East, and to do this one must go back to the days when the Portuguese conceived the idea of breaking the Venetian monopoly of the spice trade. At a later date the Dutch followed with a view to superseding the Portuguese, and finally, the Honourable East India Company was formed by certain London merchants.

About this time the West Indies Government established a botanic garden at St. Vincent, which gave the cue to the East India Company to do likewise in India, while the Dutch started one near Colombo, the idea in each case being to establish spice-yielding plants likely to prove of commercial value. In 1817 a wave of scientific enthusiasm resulted in the formation of botanic gardens on a somewhat elaborate scale in Java and Ceylon. Until the end of the 19th century botanic gardens such as those of Calcutta, Buitenzorg, Peradeniya and Singapore were engaged in most important investigational work. The introduction and trial of new crops with the object of broadening the agricultural industries of countries has occupied a major part of the time and work of botanic gardens. This work, aided by the Royal Botanic Gardens, Kew, resulted in many industries, such as, for example, tea in Ceylon, and rubber in Malaya, being formed long before the inadequate funds of private individuals would have allowed. Quite naturally the latter preferred to embark on an industry which had already passed the experimental stage, and one which showed a reasonable opportunity of success.

There has been a great deal of misunderstanding as to the objects and organisation of botanic gardens abroad, and many people appear unable to distinguish between the latter and public parks. To remove the confusion a short explanation may be appreciated. For many years, until comparatively recent date, the trial of new crops, distribution and breeding of new races of plants, etc., were almost exclusively the work of botanic gardens and experimental stations. In many cases they form the nucleus of the present departments of agriculture, which have a much larger scope inasmuch as instead of growing small plots, large acreages may be put down under a single crop. Moreover, the more comprehensive staff of scientific officers enables a department of agriculture to complete its scientific experiments, including the manufacture and analyses of the product.

The botanic garden of to-day is engaged principally in engaging and investigating the wild plants from surrounding countries, introducing, indexing and generally providing useful information, maintaining collections not only of the native plants, but of all plants which might be expected to grow when introduced.

Space does not permit of more than one or two plants of each kind being cultivated in botanic gardens; these serve both for the propagation of planting material and for purposes of study. The botanic garden in the tropics is usually the centre of horticulture, forming a place of resort, training gardeners, supplying planting material, and giving advice and assistance in horticultural matters. In such gardens, however, floral displays, beds and borders of flowering and foliage plants are maintained, but first and foremost the aim is to further botanical ends.

The Botanic Gardens Department, Penang, has had a somewhat chequered although interesting existence since it was established in 1884. In its early days it functioned as part of the then Gardens and Forests Department, Straits Settlements, and was engaged chiefly in the cultivation of essential commercial plants, inspection of crops and advising the planting community generally. The botanical and horticultural side was developed by the first Superintendent, Mr. Charles Curtis, who, when the Agricultural and Forests Department respectively took over all work connected with economic crops and that of supervising forest work, made itself responsible for the layout of the Botanic Garden. Mr. Curtis continued his work from 1884 until he retired on account of ill-health in 1903. Many plants have been named in compliment to him, and these include such plants as *Paphiopedilum Curtisii*, species of *Nepenthes*, *Medinella*, *Pentas* and others, and most are planted in the gardens to which he contributed so much. It is on record that no less than 11,500 trees were supplied from the nursery for roadside and other tree planting in 1885, a great tribute indeed to Mr. Curtis' energy and skill.

In 1903 an old Kewite, Mr. W. Fox, succeeded Mr. Curtis and remained in charge of the gardens until 1910, when Mr. R. Derry, also of Kew, was assistant to Mr. Fox and took charge of the gardens during the absence on leave of the Curator. Both continued the good work set by their predecessor, and in addition they continued to visit coconut and other estates to give planters advice.

The year 1910 was a critical time for these gardens; they were handed over to the municipality for the purpose of constructing a large reservoir. This would have necessitated damming the stream in the valley and thereby much of the attractive scenery would have been destroyed. Luckily the plan was abandoned before the gardens suffered much harm and they were handed back to the Government in 1912.

From 1910 until 1921, however, there was no European officer in charge of the Botanic Gardens and they deteriorated rapidly; much of the valuable work carried out by Messrs. Charles Curtis, William Fox and R. Derry was wasted. During the period the Herbarium collection was increased and more time was devoted to horticultural and botanical work, though the former agri-forestry work of the department was allowed to lapse.

In 1921 Mr. F. Flippance was appointed Assistant Curator, Penang Gardens, which was a part of the Straits Settlements Gardens Department. As the first Assistant Curator for 11 years, Mr. Flippance was faced with a formidable task, but in addition to relaying out the paths, drives and gardens generally, he was frequently called upon to give advice on roadside tree and other planting work in the municipal area.

At this time the work of the department began to extend, ornamental planting of gardens throughout Georgetown, the Governor's ground, as well as the gardens at 2,500 feet on Penang Hill, were developed. An area of land adjacent to the entrance to the gardens was leased from the municipal commissioners and laid out as a nursery. In 1936 a portion of this area was levelled and a fine formal garden was constructed. Two large water lily pools and fountains were attractive features of the garden, in addition to the conservatory at the end of the vista, and the ornamental stone pillars that support a long pergola upon which climbing plants grow and provide a pleasant retreat for visitors.

In 1925, Mr. R. E. Holtum succeeded Mr. I. H. Burkill as Director of Gardens, Straits Settlements, and Mr. Flippance remained in charge as Assistant Curator, Penang, until 1937, when he was appointed Superintendent of the Gardens and Forestry Department Hong Kong.

Mr. M. R. Henderson, Curator of the Herbarium, Singapore, was in charge at Penang for a short time, as was also Mr. J. W. Ewart, while Mr. J. C. Nauen assumed charge as Assistant

Curator in 1939 and remained until he joined the Forces. He was taken prisoner and unfortunately did not survive the hardships of being a prisoner-of-war during the Japanese occupation of Malaya.

Upon re-occupation by the British in September, 1945, it was found that several of the Asiatic staff had been working in the gardens throughout the Japanese occupation. Lack of funds and proper direction, together with war debris, had resulted in the gardens getting into a very bad state. Excavations for both storage and shelter, and a large munition works for assembling torpedo bombs were afforded excellent concealment from aerial attack, and much of the heavier war material left behind by the Japanese has not, up to the time of writing, been removed.

Unfortunately some months elapsed before efforts were directed to the rehabilitation work, and as this was further hampered by the continual changes in the supervisory staff, it was not possible to carry out the re-establishment as quickly as it might otherwise have been done. In a period of ten months no less than seven European officers were in charge, and it was not until July, 1946, that a decision was made to divorce Penang Botanic Gardens from its parent establishment in Singapore.

On this separation taking place Mr. F. S. Banfield assumed control of the Penang Department which, in addition to the Botanic Gardens, also included a Hill Station Grounds at 2,500 feet, residency and other Government gardens. In addition to the above duties Mr. Banfield acts as Adviser to the Public Gardens in Kuala Lumpur, and to the Municipality, Penang. The first task undertaken was the identification and classification of plants, as during the occupation, owing to neglect, many plants had been lost.

Since July, 1946, a thorough survey of the Gardens has been taken, collections have been re-grouped, and a general reorganisation has taken place. The nurseries have been reconstructed and many alterations have been made, including the replanning of a formal garden. In the nursery the opportunity is taken of growing specimen trees and shrubs which may be used to beautify private gardens, as well as for roadside and park planting.

The Royal Palm Avenue was established from trees grown in the Public Gardens, Kuala Lumpur, and in Peel Avenue these Royal Palms are classic in their simplicity. Whether viewed under the midday sun, or under a cloudy sky, in full moonlight, or in torrential rain, their graceful stems detach themselves from their surroundings and appear as so many slender columns each surmounted by feathery scrolls. This avenue is approximately 1,600 yards in length and was planted in 1936. Its dimensions and proportions are almost perfect, yet for such uniformity of growth to be maintained for so long, is most unusual with this palm.

The Municipal Commissioners frequently seek the advice of the Department which, throughout the years of their existence, has contributed no small part to the success of establishing and maintaining the roadside trees of Penang, which are undoubtedly without equal anywhere in Malaya. The remarkable avenues of Angsana trees (*Pterocarpus indica*) are particularly fine. The lovely golden yellow flowers are borne in masses on trees nearly 100 feet high and later they spread a carpet of gold on the roads beneath. They bloom at intervals over a period of four or five months and are indeed a spectacle not easily forgotten.

One important function of the Botanic Gardens is the exchange of plant material with other countries. Lectures and demonstrations to parties of students and others are given, whilst the senior staff teach and examine classes of schoolchildren in nature study, forestry, botany and horticulture.

The Botanic Gardens are situated about five miles from the town of Georgetown, and are completely surrounded by evergreen jungle-clad hills of 1,200 feet. They are regarded as one of Penang's chief assets in that not only do they provide an open space, but they also provide an unailing source of interest to jaded ocean travellers.

The actual site of the Botanic Gardens is a valley divided by a stream into two sections. On either side of this stream are a series of close-mown undulating lawns on which are tastefully arranged beds of flowers and other plants. Nearby is a bandstand where the Municipal Band plays twice a week, when the colour of the flowers in the gardens is added to by the bright dresses of a cosmopolitan crowd of visitors.

Several hundred feet above the gardens is a waterfall that may be viewed from several places in the gardens and from which the latter receive their name. The offices are unobtrusively situated a few hundred yards from the entrance, on the jungle edge, and within the office there is comprehensive library and Herbarium.

Throughout the Gardens are situated ten well designed plant houses in which excellent collections of plants are maintained. Unfortunately a great deal of repair work is necessary before the houses can be put into full use.

Another most charming part of the Gardens is the Lily Pond, which lies about 100 yards from the motor road, and is approached by a shady path and surrounded by large tree ferns and a variety of tropical trees and creepers. Another delightful corner of the Gardens is the Fern Rockery, which was constructed around the stream which is fed by the waterfall.

Other excellent features in the grounds are the Sun Rockery, which covers about an acre of land, and also the Formal Garden, which is most popular with the residential population. The two

chief borders are each about 100 yards long and contain a wealth of flowering plants, so selected as to ensure that throughout the whole year the borders remain colourful. The successional displays of annuals in the beds are rather reminiscent of the gardens of the West, and Europeans find the closely clipped hedges, lily and other ornamental pools and closely mown lawns, much to their liking.
