

VERNACULAR NAMES
OF PLANTS

From Whom	Principal, Agricultural officer
Place	Kedah
Date	5-3-32.

SUBJECT

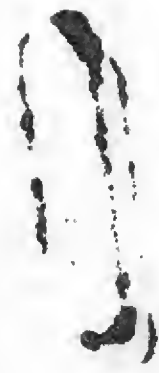
Forwards specimens of grasses
for identification

Connected Papers

MINUTES

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|---|--------------------------|-----------------------|
| ① | Letter from P.A.O. Kedah | No 139/50 d/d 5-3-32 |
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No Minutes should be written on this page. A separate half-sheet to
be used if required.



MALAYA BROADCASTING CORPORATION

TO: E. J. H. Corner.....

SCIENCE IN MALAYA -- Part 6.

"POPULAR NAMES OF PLANTS
IN MALAYA"

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Author.....E.J.H. Corner, Botanical Gardens

Read By.....E.D. Robertson

TRANSMISSIONS

Monday, 15th September, 1941, ~~8.00 - 8.15~~ ~~9.15 - 9.30~~ p.m.

(21.15 - 21.30)

20.00 - 20.15

ZHL, ZHP1, ZHP2.

EDR/TDS

POPULAR NAMES OF PLANTS IN MALAYA

The Rain-tree, the Angsana, the Durian, Vanda Miss Joachim and Bougainvillea Mrs. Butt! I think you all know, without doubt, the plants which I mean. And if I were to talk of kapur, chengai, nibong, or bakau, our minds would also turn to the same subjects. But, if I were to tell you of the Mengkulang and Chelagi trees round the padang at Kota Bahru, in the shade of which richshaw-pullers and peons loll, would you picture the Bunga Tanjong and the Asam Jawa or Tamarind, as the trees are called in most parts of Malaya? And if I were to tell you that Buah Pisang is collected from large shady trees sixty feet high at Kuala Trengganu, you would think me just an ordinary, mistaken traveller who had spent but a few hours ashore gleaning tit-bits for a novel. You may learn that Jambu Gajus is eaten in Singapore, Jambu Golok in Malacca, and Buah Keterek in Kota Bahru, but you might not be able to discover so easily that they were merely local names for the Cashew-nut. The Custard Apple which I saw last month in a garden in Johore was smooth and brown. How can that be, you say, because our Custard Apples are green and knobbly? I am afraid we have fallen into a bad habit in Malaya and have muddled up the English names for these West Indian fruits, for what we call the Custard Apple is really the Sweet Sop or Sugar Apple and the true Custard Apple or Bulloch's Heart is seldom seen in our markets. Likewise there may be confusion over the Flame of the Forest. If we have any listeners in India, they will think not of the feathery foliaged trees which we know so well, but of the Dadap-like trees called Butea frondosa which is not grown in Malaya. In India, our Flame of the Forest is called the Gul Mohur or Flamboyant. The other day, too, I was reading in an

Agricultural report from New Guinea about some varieties of Yam and Keladi which were recommended as vegetables. The popular names of these plants were quite unknown to me but I could hardly believe that we had not got the same plants, or some very like them, in Malaya, especially as Mr. Burkill, a former Director of the Singapore Botanical Gardens, had made an extensive study of tropical Yams and had collected together living plants of a great many varieties, the better of which have since been distributed over the country. Nevertheless, to satisfy my curiosity, I asked the Director of Agriculture at Rabaul in New Guinea to send me some tubers that we may grow in the Botanical Gardens, for comparison.

The further afield we go in the study of plants, the more uncertain do we become of their identity because of their different popular names. The conclusion is often reached that it is little use employing popular names; and how botanists have overcome this difficulty by their system of scientific nomenclature, Dr. Furtado told you in his talk a fortnight ago. But there cannot be a living code of scientific names for reference without a great deal of botanical research and unless a large staff of botanists is maintained to interpret and perpetuate botanical science, such as there is in Soviet Russia and the United States. In tropical Asia we are very far from the attainments of these countries. The flora has been studied by few botanists and its very richness renders it so much more complicated than a temperate flora. As a sidelight on this difficulty I may recall the remark of Sir Joseph Hooker, who was the Director of the Royal Botanic Gardens at Kew in England and was one of the botanical pioneers in the Himalayas: to be capable of studying a tropical flora, Hooker said that

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a botanist must memorize the names and diagnostic characters of at least four thousand species of plants! Hooker was thinking mainly of flowering plants and ferns, and nowadays we must add the host of fungi, of which there are probably between twenty and thirty thousand species in Malaya. Names we must have and names uniformly applied. And where there are no botanical names or for sundry reasons they cannot be discovered, we must use vernacular names. Thus it happens that Malay, Tamil and Chinese names acquire unwonted significance in the East, particularly in the study of economic plants. Moreover, who but botanists will trouble to remember scientific names, and they only, when they cannot/ ^{reasonably} use popular ones? I have forgotten the botanical names of the pear and the apple, the walnut, the cricket-bat willow and the liquorice plant, but I could look them up in a dictionary at the Botanical Gardens and very quickly discover a host of information. In Malaya, despite the research which has been done, only in comparatively few cases will a popular name lead one to a correct identification. What is Pak Choy? What is Keladi Pinang? What is Torong Pipit or Daun Kechubong? What is Urd Dhal or Mung? What is Kedeleh, Kechapi or Setul? Only too frequently we cannot reply unless we have a specimen to identify. I have imagined a great index wherein all these vernacular names are correctly set against their botanical equivalents, so that the answer can be given without even setting down the telephone-receiver.

Now I do not mean to say that we have no such indexes to consult in Malaya for we have Watson's book of Malayan Plant Names, Burkill's Dictionary of the Economic Products of the Malay Peninsula, and several other smaller works of great value. But these works are pioneers to be enlarged and amended

as knowledge increases, indeed to be maintained and built upon, and as yet, they touch only the fringe of Tamil and Chinese vocabularies. Moreover, it is known, and it is inevitable, that through mistakes in the collecting, labelling, and identification of specimens, many recorded names have been assigned to the wrong plants. I am sure that anyone who has studied the subject will agree that at least seventy per cent, of the recorded names must be carefully checked. Some of the mistakes we can rectify at the Botanical Gardens because the labelled specimens, dating from 1870 onwards, are preserved in the herbarium, but by no means all. These specimens are the true foundation of any index of vernacular names, because they are always at hand for reference; and therefore, we are trying to enlarge our collection of plant specimens with authentic vernacular names. There must be several listeners to-night who can help in this task. I know there are many popular names of plants used among the various communities in Malaya of which we have no record and which we would like to render current as common knowledge, for many will fill troublesome gaps in our nomenclature. A few years ago, when I was taking classes in Nature Study for teachers in Singapore, I learned too how important it was to have English names for use in the English Schools. That, I was told, was, of course, Old Ladies' Nightcaps; and I, poor academician, knew it only as *Angelonia*. Then we found Good Girls and Naughty Boys and I dared not say it was really *Asystasia coromandeliana* in its two varieties. I have always remembered Evoe's quip in Punch,

when he was relating of a round of golf with a botanist. "And that," said the botanist, "is Ranunculus ficaria, the lesser Celandine." "Ha! said Evoe, Ficus. a fig! Do men gather figs of the Lesser Celandine?" On another occasion,

when staying at Cluny Estate near Slim River in Perak, we came upon a beautiful yellow-trumpeted forest herb in great profusion and we christened it the Cowslip of Cluny, for though it is a specimen of *Didymocarpus*, goodness knows what its full botanical name should be. I cannot^{but} believe that there are many of you who have unscientific names of the plants which you particularly fancy or cultivate, and I would ask that you should send labelled specimens for record to the Director of Gardens, Singapore. The specimens can be rolled up in a newspaper and, if possible, should have flowers and fruits as well as leaves.

During our scientific moments, nowadays, at the Botanical Gardens we are studying particularly the local varieties of Keladi, Bayam, and Trong or Brinjal. These are plants of villages and agricultural land for which names are constantly needed, but for which we have no adequate nomenclature. We rely therefore mainly on the vernacular names. We are growing as many varieties as possible so that we can have a full knowledge of the plants and can compare them as they grow. In this matter we have received great help from Agricultural officers, especially in Perak and Kedah, who have sent material, and we will welcome reliable information from any source. I may say that I am looking for a large-fruited thorny Brinjal: it seems that these thorny varieties are grown in temperate countries but apart from the small-fruited thorny Trong Prat none has yet been collected in Malaya. Needless to say we have already made numerous discoveries because very little of such detailed work has been done in tropical Asia.

When the vernacular names have been collected and rightly assigned to the botanical ones, then comes the task

of selection and standardization for general use. Many plants have more than one Malay, Tamil or Chinese name and one must decide not merely which is the commonest but which is the most appropriate, and one must also consider the vernacular names which the plant may have in other countries, whether for instance it would not be better for us to adopt their names as Queensland Arrowroot for Canna edulis which Malays call Ganyong. Several common names, which are applied to a great many unrelated plants must also be coupled with some distinctive epithet, thus the names Pisang, Puding, Merlimau and Chempaka correspond with the miscellaneous English names like Spinach, Bean, Yam and Rose. I will mention a few instances in which this selective work has been done, to the great benefit of all persons who may be concerned. There is firstly the Forest Department's list of preferred Malay Names for the timber trees of the country. Then there are the English, Malay, Tamil and Chinese names of vegetables in the Department of Agriculture's recent book on Vegetable Growing in Malaya. And there are the English and Malay names of common trees and shrubs in the book on Wayside Trees of Malaya issued from the Botanical Gardens. Recently the problem has received a war-time value because Food Supply Officers in fixing the prices of vegetables, fruits and so on, have to publish lists of vernacular names and thus help to standardise their use. In Singapore we have lists of Chinese names for vegetables, with their English equivalents, published in the markets. How important is this problem of the uniform application of popular names in all matters concerning plants can be realised from the list issued about twelve years ago in England of the preferred popular names for plant-diseases in the British Empire, such

as Crown Rust of Oats, Yellow Rust of Barley, Black-Leg of Potato and Stem-Rot of Tomato, which compare with the Brown Root, Red Root, Brown Bast, Mildew and so on of the the Rubber tree.

If we can get on with this compilation of popular names, however slowly, in Malaya the next generation of botanists, agriculturists, foresters, planters and horticulturists will be spared an immense amount of book-work and uncertainty, because students will issue from schools and colleges already equipped with the correct use of popular names and will not have to struggle with the problems which their predecessors met at every turn.

No. (23) in A.O.Pk.S. 236/39. Agricultural Office,

Teluk Anson, 8th September 1941.

— "Shan blue" Kott"

Kwat Choi - Nasturtium indicum.

Dear Corner,


Herewith a small packet seed of the above. Cooked it makes a good spinach: I have not tried it raw yet but Bailey, under the name Poripa indica, calls it the Tropical Cress so it might be a useful salad.

2. I have found it cultivated only in one locality near Sg. Siput South and it is those crops which are on sale in Kampar. The gardeners introduced it 6 - 7 years ago from another nearby locality where it no longer occurs so I cannot shed light on its local origin. The general opinion is that it has been introduced from China and Ridley's localities also suggest recent introduction.

3. At Sg. Siput South it is grown on beds of other, slower-growing vegetables. Thus it was a common self-sown weed on Indian Lettuce beds. The procedure is to delay harvest until it has seeded itself: self-sown seedlings come up very thickly and are not thinned out. It is said to commence flowering after 25-30 days.

4. Many thanks for the Junipers which you ordered for the District Officer. They are very fine plants.

Yours sincerely,


H.P. Allen,
Agricultural Officer,
Perak South.

To... The Director of Gardens,.....

Singapore.

MALAYA BROADCASTING CORPORATION

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Telephones: Studios & Transmitters 3745, Town Office 5621

11th September, 1941

E. J. H. Corner, Esq.,
Potanic Gardens,
SINGAPORE.

Dear Sir,

I attach copy of your talk on "Popular Names of Plants in Malaya", in our series "Science in Malaya" No. 6, for your retention.

You will observe that the time of broadcasting has been changed from 9.15 p.m. to 8.00 p.m. on Monday, 15th September.

Yours faithfully,



E. D. Robertson
For Director of Programmes

B7-2/11

Enc: EDR/THDC
All communications should be addressed to the Chairman, P. O. Box No. 355, Singapore

Lombong, Kelca Tinggi

Sondapan } Rumpun
Pasukan pengayutan } Antai

Bug Kamban - Sabh - Jibh

Selani - Sondapan