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Singapore Government

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SPEECH BY DR JOHN CHEN, MINISTER OF STATE FOR NATIONAL DEVELOPMENT AND MINISTER OF  
STATE FOR COMMUNICATIONS AND INFORMATION TECHNOLOGY AT THE OFFICIAL OPENING OF THE  
FIRST COLLOQUIUM ON ORCHID RESEARCH AND INDUSTRY HELD ON THURSDAY, 1 JUL 99 AT 9.15  
AM AT NUS LT31

Professor Lee Soo Ying;

Distinguished Guests;

Ladies and Gentlemen:

I am happy to join you this morning for the opening of the 1st Colloquium on  
Orchid Research and Industry.

## Singapore's position in the international markets

2 Singapore has carved a name for itself in the world floriculture flowers and plants trade. The International Floriculture Quarterly Report, published last year, ranks Singapore 24th in terms of floriculture exports to the main world markets ranked by top 66 source countries. This puts us ahead of countries such as Australia (25th), Philippines (44th), Malaysia (49th) and Indonesia (54th). It is due largely to our exports of premium quality orchids.

3 Singapore's orchid industry has come a long way since orchid breeding started back in 1928 and export began on a modest scale in 1939. The orchid growing and exporting business has evolved from a traditional small industry to large-scale production using modern technology and methods. Today, the export value of cut-orchids from Singapore has grown to \$21.8 million. This is double the \$10.4 million for such exports in 1986. Singapore is the second largest exporter of orchids in the world, next only to Thailand. Besides orchids, Singapore also exported some \$22.1 million worth of plant products, such as foliage and ornamental plants, last year.

4 Our reputation for producing exquisite, high quality orchids is further enhanced by the various awards won at international flower shows. For example, orchids from Singapore won some 20 awards recently at the 16th World Orchid Conference in Canada. Also, in May this year, one of our orchid growers bagged two awards at the International Flower Show held in France.

## Government's assistance in the development of the industry

5 The Government, through the Primary Production Department (PPD), plays a key role in the development of Singapore's floriculture industry. Some 430 ha of land in the Agrotechnology Parks have been allocated for the production of orchids and ornamental plants. Currently, there are 103 farms on 371 ha of land. PPD's Orchid and Ornamental Plant Centre collaborates with the industry and research institutes to improve production and develop new planting materials. The Centre also promotes the industry through floriculture shows and trade missions. Relevant technologies are transferred through training, technical pamphlets and seminars.

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## Challenges ahead

6 But what are the challenges ahead for the orchid industry and how can it maintain and indeed build upon its premier position? First, the orchid industry must continually come up with new and better products, improve on the production processes, and protect those products and processes it develops. Technological leadership is critical to the long-term survival of the industry as competitors are quick to catch up on available technologies.

7 Biotechnology, for instance, has been used to develop new varieties and improve on the quality of our orchids. In the earlier years, tissue culture was the cornerstone for large-scale production of orchid plants. Today, molecular techniques are used to identify markers linked to desirable traits, such as high floral yield and specific colours. Such techniques are useful to hasten the breeding programmes for new varieties.

8 Another useful tool is DNA fingerprinting. A DNA fingerprint, similar to one's own fingerprint, can be used for identification of orchid varieties. Each individual plant has a unique fingerprint that can be used to support the application for patents. Any attempt by competitors to clone a protected variety can be exposed by checking any part of the plant for evidence.

9 The second challenge is the need to diversify our overseas markets through sustained and well co-ordinated marketing. The Trade Development Board (TDB), with the help of PPD, has been organising trade missions overseas to look for market opportunities. Exporters wishing to promote their orchids to new markets should tap onto TDB's schemes, such as the Double Taxation Deduction Scheme, International Brand Marketing Programme, and Total Marketing Plan. The long gestation period of three years or more that is needed to evaluate any new orchid hybrid/variety for its cut flower potential calls for branding of the flower and strong market promotion once such a flower is identified.

10 Promotion of new hybrids can be tied-in with conventions and trade shows held in Singapore and overseas. For example, in a convention held by the National Science and Technology Board during the National Technology Month, the Board had small pots of orchids placed in the hotel rooms of each invited speaker as a take-away gift. I am also told that in an overseas exhibition which PPD and other Singapore government agencies participated in, stalks of cut orchids given away generated much appreciation amongst the recipients. New hybrids, accompanied by a brief description of their origin and characteristics, make valuable gifts. Exporters should therefore be on the lookout for large conventions and major events being organised by Singapore firms, both locally and overseas, and approach the Singapore Tourism Board and the organisers for consideration in promoting new hybrids. The coming International Orchid Show to be held in Malaysia in the year 2002 can also be a platform for our local hybrids to be displayed to advantage. The orchid industry should thus gear up to this challenge of marketing and promotion.

11 The third challenge is to start an external wing. It has been said that one of the limiting factors for expansion of the floriculture industry is Singapore's scarce land area. There is, however, potential for Singapore growers and entrepreneurs to expand the floriculture industry through investments in nearby countries by offering opportunities for joint ventures, technical partnerships, and other forms of business arrangements with their Asian counterparts. Some of our growers have expanded into countries in the region, such as India, China, Malaysia and Indonesia. They have leveraged on Singapore's excellent infrastructure and support, and retained their base here for their upstream research and marketing activities. We will need to build up more knowledge-based activities here to maintain our competitive edge in the orchid and floriculture business.

12 Ladies and gentlemen, it is timely that this colloquium is held to provide a forum for discussion among scientists, growers and government officials. I hope that you will have a fruitful discussion. I would like to take this opportunity to wish the orchid industry a bright future.

13 I now have the pleasure of declaring this colloquium open.

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