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SPEECH BY MR. LEE KUAN YEW, SENIOR MINISTER
AT THE LAUNCH OF THE NATIONAL ORCHID GARDEN
ON FRIDAY, 20 OCTOBER 1995 AT 6.00 PM
AT THE SINGAPORE BOTANIC GARDENS

Even in the 1960s, when the Government had to grapple with grave problems of unemployment, lack of housing, health and education, I pushed for the planting of trees and shrubs. I have always believed that a blighted urban jungle of concrete destroys the human spirit. We need the greenery of nature to lift up our spirits. So in 1967, I launched the Garden City program to green up the whole island and try to make it into a garden.

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After 30 years of sustained effort and learning on the job, the Parks and Trees Division, now called the Parks and Recreation Department, have turned Singapore into a verdant metropolis. Trees and colourful shrubs line the roads. Flowering plants and creepers brighten up concrete structures. Green open spaces and parks soften the urbanscape everywhere we go. We have created a pleasant living and working environment for Singaporeans. It is good for morale.

This green transformation required political will and sustained effort, from schools to community centres, to SAF camps and HDB towns, and whole-hearted support by the media. In the 60s and 70s, we planted fast-growing creepers like “*vernonia elliptica*”, and “maiden’s jealousy”, and “instant” trees like *angsana*, rain tree and *eugenia grandis*, for quick results. Once we had greenery over the main parts of the island, we added dashes of colour with free-flowering trees such as the Yellow Flame, and the deep pink frangipani. We planted colourful *bougainvillea* on our overhead pedestrian bridges creating hanging gardens across our roads. To get variety, I encouraged the Parks and Recreation Department to send men to visit Botanic Gardens in other equatorial and tropical regions of the world to select new species of trees and shrubs which can grow in our climate. The results of this active search became visible in the 1980s, when swaths of colour began to appear along many of our major roads and in our HDB new towns.

We also developed our parks. In July 1973, we formed the Garden City Action Committee, which is still doing good work. Existing parks were replanted, expanded, and spruced up. New ones were developed. In 1967, we had 700 hectares of parkland. Today, besides the nature reserves, we have

some 2,400 of parkland, in 57 regional parks and 313 neighbourhood parks spread throughout the island.

Two Commissioners of Parks and Recreation, Mr. Wong Yew Kwan (1974-1982) and Dr. Chua Sian Eng (1983-1995) have made signal contributions to the greening of Singapore. I kept up a barrage of proposals and suggestions on them, many unworkable but some translated into successful policies, like planting the ficus pumilia (ivy ficus) to creep up and cover all concrete retaining walls. They gave leadership and infused enthusiasm in the men and women who had to sustain the day to day work, not just planting trees and shrubs, but also maintaining them in good health. Trees get sick, attacked by various bacteria, viruses and fungi. Some of them are incurable, like the wilt disease which has killed many thousands of our beautiful, big angsanas. There has to be a suitable environment for each particular species of trees, sun, rain, ground space for roots and not too high a pollution level. Until the greening campaign got into full swing, I did not realise that behind each roadside tree is an engineering problem to be solved.

We must improve our park management to maximise benefits for the people using them. Park managers have to complement their expertise in horticultural maintenance with park management skills. They have to innovate, to explore and try new ways to increase the attractiveness of our parks to visitors. We need fresh and exciting ideas to improve existing features and develop new ones. To be successful, we have to keep learning from other successful parks elsewhere, and have an entrepreneurial spirit. We need to publicise the attractions of our parks to Singaporeans and tourists alike.

The Singapore Botanic Gardens itself is being upgraded. The National Parks Board has revitalised a 136 year old institution with an international reputation as a tropical botanic centre. Their aim is to make the Botanic Gardens a world-class botanic and horticultural institution, relevant to our times. There will be new horticultural displays, landscaping features, plant collections, interpretation panels and outreach educational programmes.

At Napier Road is the heritage core, a serene, mature landscape for family outings and passive recreation. Here we have a historical collection of tropical plants which reminds the world of the Garden's role in introducing plants with economic application for eventual exploitation. This garden was the source of the rubber seedlings that changed the course of the history of the region.

Singaporeans who want more active recreation will have another core area along Bukit Timah Road, with jogging paths which traverse a rolling terrain landscaped with plants of economic value to man. Stands of timber and fruit trees provide the shade needed by some medicinal and spice plants. In the centre of this area is a lake with ecologically balanced communities of aquatic plants and animal life. Our school children can learn and appreciate the dependence of man on plants. A working nursery doubles up as a classroom for the training of horticulturists.

Tourists with limited time can visit the central core where we are now. Here, we have a wide collection of palms in Palm Valley, a 4-hectare piece of primary forest, and a Symphony Shell for outdoor musical performances, all within easy walking distance. Also planned, are a new ginger garden, a heliconia walk, and an evolution garden where visitors can trace the development of the plant kingdom from the primitive cycads of the Jurassic era to the highly evolved orchid. For the convenience of visitors, there will be food and refreshment outlets, gift shops and rest areas.

The crowning attraction of the Botanic Gardens is this new National Orchid Garden. Spread over 3 hectares of landscaped terraces, it is more than 4

times the size of the old orchid enclosure. It offers visitors a comprehensive display of some 70,000 orchid plants of more than 700 types of species and hybrids. This Orchid Garden is the largest showcase for orchids in the world including some of the newest hybrids in the cut-flower industry.

Over the last twenty years, I have always enjoyed visiting the old orchid enclosure. I hope visitors will find as much pleasure in this enlarged Garden. I now declare the National Orchid Garden open.

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