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Tapping fully the potential in growing local herbs

MALAYSIANS use nearly two billion ringgit worth of herbal products each year for medicinal, culinary and cosmetic purposes.

The bulk of them, either as finished products or as raw materials, are imported mainly from China, India, Sri Lanka, Japan and the United States.

The irony is that while great strides are being made in science and technology, this great revenue-earning sector has not been fully tapped.

This is despite the fact that many of the herbal species that are found growing in Malaysia, are being researched by other countries and made into much sought-after products.

In fact, it is estimated that more than RM300 million can be saved each year by large scale commercial cultivation of some of these varieties.

And very much more can not only be saved but made to become a money-spinner if local scientists and entrepreneurs seriously conduct research and development and start manufacturing herbal products for export.

However, not all is lost. It is heartening to note that some States have been making attempts to promote the herbal plant product industry.

And indications are that in time to come this may become a major revenue earner.

Perak is one State to be highly commended. Spearheaded by the State Agricultural Development Corporation and fully backed by the Menteri Besar's Office, great steps have been taken to promote the herbal plant product industry.

Among some of the major steps taken by Perak over the years to promote the herbal plant product industry are:

- \* Setting up a special unit to encourage farmers to cultivate herbal plants.

- \* Allocating a 500ha area in Sungai Klah in Sungkai (Batang Padang District) for the cultivation of herbal plants.

- \* Establishing a 20ha site in Sungai Selinsing near Tapah for a herbal plant nursery.

- \* Encouraging the Global Herba (Perak) Sdn Bhd to supply herbs to a company in Perlis.

- \* Lending support to the Sungai Selinsing Herbal Plant Museum.

- \* Encouraging Safire Pharmaceutical (M) Sdn Bhd in Seri Iskandar Pharmaceutical Park to venture into herbal medicines.

- \* Welcoming enterprising ventures such as the Rohini company to grow hibiscus in Taiping to supply its produce to a company in Kedah.

Although on a very small scale, Perak also has the distinction of having a school, the Sekolah Rendah Menengah Menglembu, which is the only school in the country to hold an annual herbal garden exhibition.

These are just some of Perak's efforts in promoting this industry.

With such a track record and blessed with a Menteri Besar who gives his full support for the growth of this industry, it is quite natural and logical that the NST Herbal Garden Project For Schools and Colleges should have its launching in Perak Darul Ridzuan.

Of course, some other States, such as Kedah, Kelantan, Perlis and Selangor have also embarked on herbal plantations and products.

This new impetus was a direct result of Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad's call two years ago to States to venture into traditional medicines using local herbal plants.

In fact, following his call, the Cabinet even gave grants to Perak and

Selangor for this purpose.

But, to date, Perak appears to have laid the strongest foundation for the herbal plant product industry in the country.

Said Ahmad Suki Hussin, Project Officer at the Perak State Agricultural Development Corporation said:

"We work closely with farmers' organisations, agriculture departments and various agro-based bodies with the common aim of promoting the herbal industry as a economically viable venture.

"In fact, we act as a sort of umbrella organisation for those involved in the industry."

And Agriculture Minister Datuk Amar Dr Sulaiman Daud is taking a keen interest in not only Perak's venture into the herbal plant product industry, but also in the NST Herbal Garden Project.

This is not surprising, as it was Dr Sulaiman, who as Education Minister, launched the NST National Environmental Education Programme in 1992.

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