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Explosion of colour in Penang hibiscus garden

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WHEN I heard that the Hibiscus Garden in Lake Gardens, Kuala Lumpur, got its first plant from Penang, I could not wait to go there myself. How lovely it would be to have exotic flowers spanning 20cm and with several colours and designs in my own garden.

But my mind began to calculate, almost unconsciously: a trip would mean petrol, toll charges of nearly RM100 (to and fro), food and hotel bills. It would not be easy with no relatives in Penang to impose upon. With much misgivings. I put off my visit indefinitely.

The much-awaited opportunity came when our family won a contest. The prize included free meals and stay at a premier hotel. Needless to say, the hibiscus garden was on top of our itinerary. No one we asked seemed to know where the hibiscus garden was. Finally, someone said: "Just take Jalan Jelutong. The garden is in Bukit Jambul."

So we set out, all excited, for a "trial run" - only on the last day would we fill the car with plants, lest they wilt. Little did we anticipate the challenges that awaited us.

Misleading or unclear road signs and one-way streets confound even the locals. As we were going along a straight road, there was a "No Entry" sign, all of a sudden. Mystified, we retraced our path and took the left turn following an arrow. And it led us to parallel road, also with the same name.

With more round-about directions, it was over two hours before we reached our destination. All our tiredness vanished when we saw the spectacular garden with its fish ponds, reptiles, baby tigers and birds, orchids, cactus and forest trees.

Grammatophyllum speciosum, the largest orchid in the world, can be found here. It is about 1.2m long and lasts a whole month, but blooms only once a year.

There are more than 10 varieties of bananas in this garden. For example, the "ice-cream" banana is so named because of its taste. The "praying-hand" banana has leaves and fruits that resemble two hands placed over one another in prayer.

There are 200 varieties of hibiscus, which originate mainly from Florida (the US) and Hawaii, says Lisa Ooi, the manager of the garden. (Her horticulturist-husband Michael H.C. Ooi is the brains behind this venture.)

As these hybrid do not survive the local soil and climate, they are propagated by bud-grafting. The young foreign shoot is grafted to the local root stock (the red variety). The flowers resemble the "donor". So far, only three new hybrids have been registered by them, due to the low success rate. Importing them is more practical.

Two of their own hybrids have famous names, in commemoration of the person who officially opened the garden in 1992 and her husband, both doctors.

Now I can truthfully say "Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamed and Datin Seri Dr Siti Hasmah Ali are in my garden!"

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