



Spices Now & Then

A walk through the Fort Canning Garden is an educational sensory experience

By Shannon Ravenel

The Spice Garden in Fort Canning Park is set in a lovely shady spot near the top of what was once called Bukit Larangan ('Forbidden Hill') and later, after the British arrived, 'Government Hill.' The 40-metre climb is worth the effort – where else can you wander past betel nut palms, lemongrass, cinnamon trees, curry bushes, cocoa trees, laksa leaves, black pepper trees and nutmeg trees confident of what you are seeing?

The Spice Garden, a small replica of the original 19-hectare tract that Sir Stamford Raffles established on the hill in 1822, is planted with more than 100 varieties of spices and herbs, all labelled with signage that not only identifies the varieties, but also offers the history of their uses along with a few recipes. A beautiful old brick wall marks the garden's boundary and brick paths wind past what remains of Raffles' experimental botanical garden, planted in response to the 'spice mania' of his day. His early introduction of nutmeg, cloves and cinnamon furthered the foundation of Singapore's spice plantations, which dominated the island landscape for the next 35 years.

Just inside the garden entrance is the evergreen nutmeg tree whose fruit resemble plums. It was, we learn, native to the Maluku Islands (also known as the Moluccas or the Spice Islands), though Arabs soon monopolised the nutmeg trade. Later, the seeds were smuggled out by the French and cultivated in the islands of South Africa and Madagascar. Today, the sign tells us, nutmeg is found in Sri Lanka, Sumatra and the West Indies. The grated nut is widely used in sweet and savoury dishes while the essential oil in its fruit is used in medicine, perfumery and dentistry.

A little farther down the garden we pass another evergreen tree. It is cinnamon, originally from Sri Lanka, and its glossy, leathery leaves are, according to its tag, crimson when new. Today it is mainly used for flavouring, but the ancient Egyptians used it for embalming and in medieval times it was a popular aphrodisiac. Both the leaves and the bark are highly aromatic; cinnamon, as we cooks know it, is derived from

dried strips of the bark, a sample of which is provided in a coconut cup next to the sign.

Still a little uncertain about exactly what betel nuts are and where they come from? Here's the betel nut palm with a very helpful label explaining that the betel nut is not just for chewing (though it's said to be chewed by approximately 25 percent of the world's population!); it's also used for treating fever and rheumatism in Ayurvedic medicines.

And who would ever have guessed that allspice is the only spice today whose commercial production is confined to the western world? Used mostly for flavouring ketchup, marinades, barbecue sauce and Caribbean jerk today, it was once used by Russian soldiers to deodorise their boots as it possesses antimicrobial properties.

While the Spice Garden is a place all cooks will find fascinating, there's another area nearby that's handy if you're strolling with someone who's more interested in history than the culinary arts – Singapore's earliest archaeological excavation site. The archaeological dig, begun in 1984, has turned up 14th century artefacts, many of which are in display cases at the site.

To visit this breezy green hill, the most historical part of Singapore, take the MRT to Dhoby Ghaut, then hop on any one of a number of Stamford Road, Hill Street or River Valley Road buses (or perhaps take a taxi as the walk up is steep). Ask the driver to let you off at Battle Box.

Editor's Note: The National Parks Department sponsors guided tours of the Spice Trail at Fort Canning Park every last Saturday of the month at 4:00 pm. Meet at the courtyard opposite the NParks Visitor Centre. For more information see www.nparks.gov.sg

Shannon Ravenel is a US book editor with the good fortune to be in Singapore for three years. She is grateful to Neena Mittal for providing information for this article.

Photos by Susanne Paulli