

# Singapore's Heritage Trees

By Shalini Mukerji

While standing under the furry branches of the Rain tree (*Albizia saman*) in Spottiswode Park Road during a sudden downpour one afternoon, I thought about Singapore's tree-lined roads. In a certain light they make me feel as if I'm in a sort of dream forest. This particular tree, I learned, is a 'heritage tree', one among the 200 trees of 70 different species currently earmarked by the government for conservation. The Heritage Tree Scheme was rolled out in 2001 to protect trees that were rare or of historical, botanical or cultural significance and had a girth of at least five metres. Trees were considered 'heritage' because they're the living links between the past, present and future while Singapore transformed itself from tropical rainforest and swamp to a plantation and trading post, when spices were considered as valuable as gold. Today it is an increasingly



The Machang Pulasan on St John's Island grows beyond 40 metres and is the only one of its kind in Singapore



This Tembusu near the main entrance to the Botanic Gardens, the 'poster girl' featured on the SGD \$5 note, was the first among 360 trees to be earmarked as a heritage tree. It is believed this Tembusu stood here much before the garden was laid out in 1859. This evergreen, fragrant tree is as distinctive to Singapore as the Rain tree (thus called since it folds its leaves when a storm approaches and also known as the '5 pm tree' because it folds its leaves at dusk)

urban habitat that is making efforts to be a 'city in a garden'.

There are also five gazetted 'heritage roads' (a criterion for earmarking roads thus is that the canopies must touch to form a tunnel effect): Arcadia Road which spans a distance of 918 metres, the Rain tree-lined Mandai Road built in 1885 to connect the agriculture and poultry farming villages of the Upper Thompson and Woodlands areas, the 1,353-metre stretch of Mount Pleasant Road flanked by Saga trees under which you can collect their gorgeous red seeds.

For Ng Cheow Kheng, Director (Horticulture and Community Gardening), the Tembusu carries a memory-wrap, "each time I look at Singapore's five-dollar note, I'm reminded of the tree's fragrance. It brings me back to my days of growing up in a kampong, which had many Tembusu trees". She analyses the challenges for the Heritage Tree scheme, "Singapore's urban habitat is densely populated and this requires NParks to be highly adaptive. During the construction of the downtown MRT line along Upper Bukit Timah Road, portion of Cashew Road was diverted under the low-hanging canopy of a Rain tree (*Albizia saman*). Instead of removing the branches to facilitate traffic movement, NParks and the Land Transport Authority work together to protect the tree. A support was placed under the branches to lift the canopy, allowing motorists to travel under it while enjoying the beauty and shade of the heritage tree. Emphasising the community effort involved in conserving Singapore's treescape and history, she reveals, "More the half (107) of the heritage trees have been nominated by members of the public".

The National Parks website ([www.nparks.gov.sg](http://www.nparks.gov.sg)) lists Heritage Tree and Heritage

Road trails for those curious about these unassuming, leafy giants that stand tall and steadfast, rooted to the earth in an open-branched embrace of the sky.



The 70-year-old Tamarind (or Assam) tree on Fullerton Road is one of the two tamarind trees to be earmarked as heritage trees. It's possible that the second one at Surin Avenue Park is from the orchards and gardens planted by the Chinese and Eurasians who lived in this part of Upper Serangoon

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**Shalini Mukerji** has recently moved to Singapore and is enjoying the opportunity to discover this part of the world.

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All photos courtesy of the National Parks Board