



ECO-FRIENDLY Endeavours

As we become more environmentally conscious and embrace the shift towards green living, what better way to do that than by taking up sustainable and eco-friendly hobbies?

Eco-friendly hobbies and causes are fulfilling to say the least. Not only can they lead to greater wellbeing, they help to contribute to the environment and make the planet a better place to live in.

You can exercise your green thumb in organic gardening, learn vegetarian cooking, take up nature photography, make crafts using recycled materials, volunteer for a green cause, or pursue outdoor activities that are one with nature.

Calibre speaks to three personalities who have found joy and meaning in life through their eco-friendly hobbies.

CREATING BEAUTIFUL BLOOMING GARDENS

TANIA LEONG

Aromatherapist and organic gardener

As an aromatherapist, Tania Leong has been fascinated by the healing properties of nature. She did her training in London and lived there for five years before returning back home and opening a new age shop.

When she moved into a double-storey terrace house in Kuala Lumpur about five years ago, she decided to start her edible garden here. There was no grass or ground, so she learned to plant in pots.

Starting an edible garden was a lot of work. Leong began by growing her own herbs as she realised that she often wasted the ones she bought from the supermarket, after needing to use just a bit of the herbs at a time.

"At a point, I had 22 varieties of herbs such as peppermint, rosemary, sage, dill, pandan, lemongrass, cilantro, stevia, and various types of basil. I also planted turmeric, ginger, French beans, four-winged beans, choy sum, cucumber, bitter melon, old cucumber, spinach, and more.

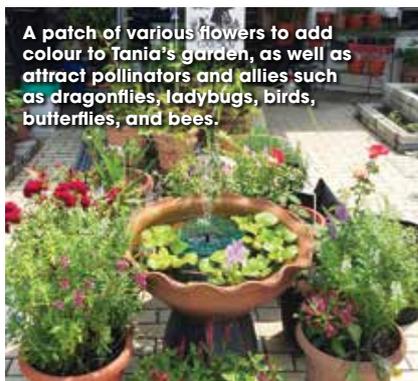
"Being a therapist, I wanted to delve into growing organic food for health reasons, knowing how commercial cultivation always include chemicals and pesticides which are suspected to be linked, for example, to diseases like cancer, allergies, and infertility," says Leong.

Her garden has flourished so

much that when joggers pass by her house in the morning, they are amazed at the variety and quantity of vegetables grown in such a small space. Tania even extended her garden into her car porch area.

"Random neighbours have been coming to take a look at my garden. And they started asking me questions regarding gardening," she says.

Leong's hobby in gardening has led to something bigger. She was invited to be the head gardener of Kebun Komuniti Hartamas (KKH) mid last year. She designed the layout plan and with a group of volunteers, began building raised beds in August



A patch of various flowers to add colour to Tania's garden, as well as attract pollinators and allies such as dragonflies, ladybugs, birds, butterflies, and bees.



One day's worth of harvest at home (e.g. bitter melon, lemongrass, yams, sweet potatoes, spinach varieties, basil, oyster mushrooms).



Tania Leong with some pak choy and kai lan.

"My garden is my sanctuary. I feel connected to Mother Earth so it keeps me grounded. It's like a form of meditation that is calming and helps me destress."



Trellis of cucumbers.

COVER STORY

2020. They now have at least 10 beds. Eighty to ninety per cent of the land is dedicated to edibles, while the rest are flowers to add colour and attract pollinators.

Leong also helps train volunteers at KKH and is happy to work together with a group of people with an eco-friendly and



sustainable mindset.

"There are about 10 to 20 of us who do the gardening each week. In the community garden, I get to meet people from all walks of life, and it's wonderful to see how much happiness it brings to so many people," she says.

She is keen to share with them about sustainability and eco-friendly ways of growing plants, and how organic food has an impact on health and the environment.

"I also help them with identifying varieties, how to harvest, and share tips on how to cook them. Many people are interested in healthy eating and healthy living," she says. From time to time, she has had people thanking her because of her contribution to the community

garden and the sustainability of the environment.

Every day, Leong would read and learn something from the Internet and books regarding gardening. When she reads of a new species that piques her interest, she will do more research on it and try to grow it herself as a challenge.

She tends to her edible garden daily, which can take an hour just to do the basic chores like watering. It's such a satisfaction where she has reaped much joy from.

"Every morning, I can't wait to go outside to see what new things have sprouted in my garden. Nothing can beat the joy of harvesting vegetables from your own garden and having it for lunch," she quips.

PHOTOGRAPHING WILDLIFE UP CLOSE & PERSONAL

PETER ONG

Performing artist and wildlife photographer

In the last four years, Peter Ong has devoted much of his time to photographing wildlife, especially the primates of Malaysia.

An avid photographer and animal lover, this passion was kickstarted when he met renowned primatologist, Dr Jane Goodall, in 2017.

"Dr Goodall asked me about the status of Malaysia's primates which I could not reply. Then I tried searching for answers

online but found there was so little information about our primates," says Ong, who is also a performing artist.

His interest was piqued and he went on to do his research on primates, speaking to various researchers, scientists and experts, including the Malaysian Primatological Society.

"Malaysia is one of 17 countries in the world blessed with mega biodiversity, but we have so little information and we know so little about our wildlife," says Ong. He also found that there were not enough images of Malaysia's primates for educational and research purposes.

That set him on the mission

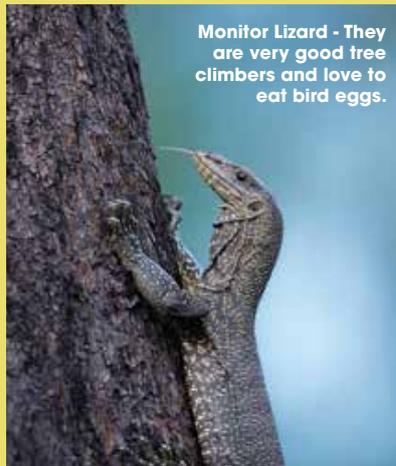


to photograph the primates of Malaysia and saw him travelling across every state of the country.

The project was even more difficult and challenging than he thought. "There is minimal information available. I needed to locate the primates and sometimes, I needed to stitch up my own map and get help from the locals."



Large Niltava - Found in montane forests. It looks black when hiding in the undergrowth.



Monitor Lizard - They are very good tree climbers and love to eat bird eggs.



Siamang - Endangered. Largest of the gibbon species found in the Central Forest Spine of Peninsular Malaysia.

"The Malaysian jungles are hilly and grow on steep slopes. We have some of the densest jungles in the world with no trails and you have to literally hack through them carefully," he says.

"It is also very challenging to get a clear, feasible, usable shot in the savage jungle," he adds.

All types of wildlife pose different challenges whenever he encounters them. For example, at the end of last year, he was in Perlis looking for the stump-tailed macaque, which is very shy and would disappear at the slightest noise and movement.

Ong also enjoys befriending people in remote villages, who share with him stories of the primates and wildlife. "I get to know more about the land from the villagers, and also learn about the bio-diversity of these regions. At the same time, I have also met many Malaysians who are working tirelessly to save our endangered species."

"In wildlife photography, you cannot coax or manipulate your subject. What you see is what you get with no artifice, no posing. That's why I find wildlife photography so genuine. And if you can sense a connection the moment you capture the shot, then it's the best reward."

The photos that Ong takes and the data of the primates he collects, such as their physical appearances and their living and eating habits, go back to the researchers to be used for outreach and education. He also learns about the animals by reading scientific journals and books.

Ong's goal is to photograph all the 25 recorded species of primates in Malaysia. The photographs are showcased in an ongoing project titled 'Project Monyet', which is supported by Roots & Shoots Malaysia, with the

aim to draw more attention to the local primates.

'Project Monyet' had an exhibition in 2019, launched by Dr Goodall. To date, Ong has captured 15 primates and is trying to look for the remaining 10—two of which are found in Langkawi and Perak while eight are found in Borneo.

Ong believes that one should explore the jungle with respect for the terrain, as there is a sense of cognisance that they share the space together.

He takes photos of all kinds of wildlife, especially bird species. "I just take a shot of what I see in the wild. For instance, in the mountains of Langkawi, I saw two beautiful hornbills and managed to take some beautiful photos of them."

Besides Malaysia, he has also photographed wildlife in Africa in 2019 when he visited the Gombe National Park in Tanzania—where Dr Goodall's longest research on chimpanzees is still ongoing—and also Kenya.

At the end of 2019 after a production in Jakarta, Ong went up to Gunung Halimun to look for the elusive Java Gibbon which is an endangered native species. He then extended his trip and went to Papua New Guinea to search for the mystical Birds of Paradise (Cenderawasih) which are only found there.

"Wildlife photography has opened up my world, not just to nature, but to people from all walks of life as well. It is a way to find inspiration and hold on to that inspiration that encourages you to look out into our natural world with continuous wonder," he says.

COVER STORY

SALVAGING FOOD TO COMBAT FOOD WASTAGE

PHILLIPA YOONG

Homemaker and volunteer

Phillipa Yoong cannot tolerate waste. In 2016, she found the Lost Food Project online and decided to volunteer herself for the cause.

"The basic idea of The Lost Food Project is to salvage food," says Yoong, a homemaker who helps in her husband's laboratory equipment business. The project focuses on salvaging surplus food from supermarkets and manufacturers and re-distributes them for free to the needy.

"We were only starting then. A group of us would drive our

cars to the loading bay of supermarkets. We sorted and divided the food and each of us transported the food to places that needed it," says Yoong.

They searched for charities that needed help, usually through word of mouth. The recipients ranged from welfare homes, shelters, food banks and also other charity organisations.

Today, the Lost Food Project has grown. Due to generous donors, the organisation has been gifted with three heavy duty trucks to help deliver food to various charities. The Malaysian Red Crescent Society had offered them a warehouse to store the food. They have hired a general



manager and some permanent staff including a warehouse coordinator and two truck drivers.

"Charities write to us and we now have a waiting list. We have a strict vetting process as we don't want anyone to take advantage of what we are doing. We also sign contracts with our donors such as wholesale markets or supermarkets," she says.

Their biggest donor is Pasar Borong Kuala Lumpur where they rescue about 17,000 meals worth of surplus food per collection. They are now giving to more than 55 charities in the Klang Valley and have also branched out to Johor Bahru.

Yoong is part of the volunteer management team and a charity liaison person. She handles new volunteers and helps to liaise with two charities.

Before any volunteers come on board, they have to attend a Zoom meeting where she gives a short presentation and answers any questions. They are then put into contact with one of the 13 department heads.





Loading sorted food into a truck.

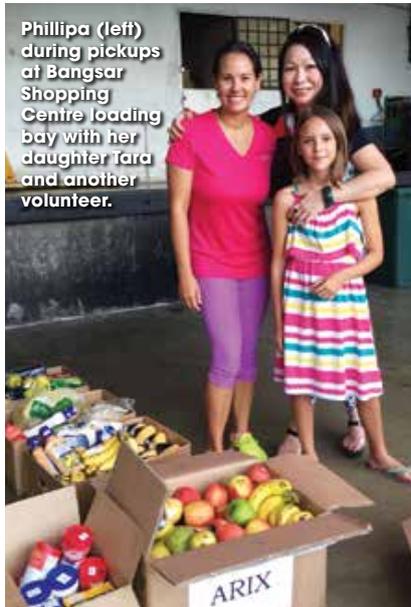


Yoong (second left) with volunteers at a supermarket.

For the first two years, her volunteer work was almost like a full-time job. It was very intense for Yoong.

"There were only a handful of us in the beginning. I was part of the committee and we had to do everything. I was a volunteer coordinator, a part-time secretary, a marketing communications executive, a newsletter creator, a driver and more. Now we have more than 200 active volunteers plus hired staff so the work is much more manageable," she says.

She stays on the ground to be in touch with new volunteers and help them. During the Covid-19 pandemic, there was a core team that handled most of the logistics. The other volunteer roles such as



Phillipa (left) during pickups at Bangsar Shopping Centre loading bay with her daughter Tara and another volunteer.

"Volunteering is very fulfilling. It is most satisfying knowing that we are able to make a difference in the lives of others."

warehouse sorting and cleaning had to be scaled down.

Yoong is also involved in a few other volunteer causes. She is the Chair of the Kebun Komuniti Hartamas. She helps to run a Netball Club for young teenage girls and earlier she was also part of the Ibu Family Resource Group—a support group for new and expecting moms.

Since young, Yoong's mom has instilled in her to respect the environment, especially trees. "Becoming involved in the Lost Food Project and the Kebun Komuniti reflect my beliefs," she says.

She has also inculcated good practices in her two teenage daughters. At home, they wash, cut and stuff any plastic bags into eco-bricks, have compost bins and recycle as much as they can, to minimise waste. She believes small changes can make a big difference.

"I am proud and happy to be associated with the Lost Food Project," says Yoong. "We also have an education team to educate the next generation. Efforts in schools and social media outreach can make a big impact."

The Lost Food Project is also about sustainability and reducing the carbon footprint. It aims to improve food security, protect the environment, and save money.

"I like working with people. And when you get a good team and accomplish something together, it is a wonderful feeling. Remembering that we are helping people who really need it keeps me going," she concludes. ☺



A busy day with volunteers helping to sort food at the warehouse.