

SPEECH BY MR MAH BOW TAN, MINISTER FOR NATIONAL DEVELOPMENT, AT “A TALE OF TWO GARDENS”, A CELEBRATION TO MARK THE SINGAPORE BOTANIC GARDENS’ 150TH ANNIVERSARY & KEW GARDENS’ 250TH ANNIVERSARY, 03 APRIL 2009, 5:00 PM AT THE BOTANY CENTRE

Your Excellency Mr Paul Madden, British High Commissioner to Singapore
Professor Tommy Koh, Ambassador at Large
Mrs Christina Ong, Chairman, National Parks Board
Lady Yuen-Peng McNeice
Your Excellencies
Distinguished Guests
Ladies and Gentlemen

Good evening. It gives me great pleasure to be here with you at this special event, which marks the start of the year-long programme to celebrate the Singapore Botanic Gardens' 150th birthday. The celebration is especially joyous and meaningful as it coincides with that of an old friend – the UK's Royal Botanic Gardens at Kew, popularly called the Kew Gardens, celebrates its 250th anniversary this year.

A Tale of Two Gardens

2 The histories of the Singapore Botanic Gardens and Kew Gardens have been intertwined since the 19th Century. During the British colonial times, botanists and horticulturists trained at Kew Gardens were deployed to administer the Singapore Botanic Gardens. In 1877, Kew Gardens presented our Botanic Gardens with 22 rubber seedlings. These seedlings seeded the rubber revolution in Southeast Asia and contributed to the economic boom in the region. Even after Singapore gained independence, the ties between Botanic Gardens and Kew Gardens continue to grow. We still actively exchange plants, scientific knowledge and experiences in managing these two world-renowned gardens. Today, both Gardens will celebrate their friendship and anniversaries with a simultaneous tree-planting ceremony on their respective grounds.

A Premier Botanical Institution and A Favourite Green Space

3 The Singapore Botanic Gardens was established in 1859 as an institution for botanical and horticultural research and education. Since then, the Gardens has matured into an established botanical institution, respected for its expertise in tropical botany and horticulture, and achievements in pioneering orchid hybridization and cultivation in the region. Today, the Singapore Botanic Gardens is widely regarded as a leading centre for research and conservation.

4 While the Gardens remains true to its original scientific mission, it has also evolved into a much-loved civic space and now ranks as one of Singapore's top attraction. Recent international accolades such as Time Magazine's choice of the Gardens as "Asia's Best Urban Jungle" and a three-star rating by the Michelin Green Guide are a collective testimony to the Gardens' endearing charm.

5 I am sure many of you, like me, have fond memories of the Gardens close to our hearts. Whether it was a visit seeking sanctuary and reflection within the Gardens or a recollection of picnics in our childhood years, the Gardens has always been a much-loved green space for our people.

The Gardens' 150th Anniversary - A Celebration for All

6 The Gardens will continue to be a People's Garden – a shared arena for family and community bonding, and the custodian of our collective memories. Today's event kick-starts a year-long series of modest, yet exciting, educational and engaging activities, in celebration of the Gardens' 150th anniversary. These activities will provide people with opportunities to come together, reminisce, celebrate and feel a sense of pride in having nurtured one of Singapore's favourite national icons.

7 One of the highlights is "Garden Stars", an event that will bring together 40 students to design and build a permanent garden in the Botanic Gardens, under the guidance of award-winning designers. "Garden Stars" aims to send a message of hope and inspiration to the students that with hard work, passion and commitment, they can be a "star" in the industry. This project will introduce the students to landscaping and horticulture as a possible career.

8 We will also see 150 couples exchange vows in a mass wedding ceremony to be held at the Gardens in the later part of this year. Organised in partnership with Singapore Press Holdings, this event pays tribute to the Gardens as a popular venue for courting couples and wedding nuptials.

9 There will also be events aimed at engaging and educating the public on the economic importance and beauty of the plant world. This includes informative and inspiring events, such as public exhibitions and a forum on conservation helmed by renowned environmentalist Jane Goodall.

Nurturing the Gardens – A Community Effort

10 The community has been central to the Gardens' mission of connecting plants and people over the years. The Gardens has helped to raise appreciation for our natural environment through a diverse range of guided tours, talks and workshops. In achieving this, the Gardens is fortunate to have the support of a strong network of partners, volunteers and supporters.

11 Today's event is another fine example of the collaboration between the Gardens and its community of supporters and partners. They have come together to mark this special occasion by contributing to this meaningful event in various ways.

12 From Lady Yuen-Peng McNeice, we are honoured to receive the "Gardens of Perpetual Summer" publication to commemorate the Botanic Gardens' 150 years of achievements. We are also pleased to receive from the Singapore Commodity Exchange and Mr Tan Jiew Hoe, President of Singapore Gardening Society, their generous contributions towards "The Seed that Changed the World" – a public exhibition that showcases the role that the Gardens played in pioneering the rubber industry.

13 I also understand that some 500 students from Nanyang Primary School have been labouring over the last few days to put together a birthday gift for the Gardens, which will be presented later. Meant to be a surprise, they have declined to tell me what this mystery present is.

Conclusion

14 The Botanic Gardens has flourished over the years, thanks to the tireless efforts of many in our community who have offered their time and resources. I would like to take this opportunity to express my sincere appreciation to our passionate sponsors, partners and volunteers for your unstinting support.

15 The 150th anniversary of the Singapore Botanic Gardens is truly a significant milestone that all Singaporeans can be proud of. Congratulations to all staff and partners of the Botanic Gardens on your achievements, and keep up your good work in continuing the legacy of the Gardens! May the Gardens bring us more joy, knowledge and happy memories in the years to come.