

LIFE&TIMES GREEN

Plant a free tree

The Free Tree Society provides free seedlings to the public to increase the suburban greenscape, writes **Aneeta Sundaraj**

WHAT do you discuss with parents who, like you, are waiting to pick their children up after class? The weather? Which tuition centres are good, or politics?

For 36-year-old Baida Jane Hercus and Datin Seri Bettina Khan, 47, it was something quite extraordinary.

"Our children go to the same school, the same class, in fact," says Bettina. "One day, Baida turned to me and asked 'Why don't we have an Arbor Day?'"

Arbor Day is a day when individuals and groups are encouraged to plant and care for trees.

Once the decision was made to have an Arbor Day, their discussions

gained momentum, especially when they roped in friends and family. Soon, there were enough of them to become the seven founding members of what is now known as the Free Tree Society Kuala Lumpur.

The other members are Munirah Abdul Hamid, Zaidatul Zurita Abdul Rahman (Zai), Surinta Abraham, Mohala Santharamohana and Aishah Sinclair.

Casting a glance around the concourse area of Bangsar Shopping Centre KL, Bettina says: "We started last year and I can't believe we've evolved into this."

This referred to an event to celebrate World Environment Day, which fell on June 5, 2013. Nori Abdullah, the guest-of-honour at the event, bore witness to the society receiving a cheque for RM20,000 from Rickey Soon, the general manager of operations for Guardian pharmacy. In addition, the society also gave away 550 plants to members of the public.

The principles upon which the society works are simple: Members take seeds from plants, germinate and sprout them, look after the seedlings and then give away healthy little plants to the public on environmental holidays. The idea is to encourage a whole bunch of other green goals and objectives such as improving the landscape of suburbia and the city.

In addition, people will learn more about planting and caring for trees.

The type of plants given away at the event included pandan, lemon-grass, creeping fig and even a durian tree. Each plant came with instructions on how to give it proper care.

Bettina says: "These plants were part of a project we started last year. The entire project was made possible by BDRM which allowed us to use a piece of land they owned, a 371 sq m triangular plot in Jalan Limau Purut in Bangsar, Kuala Lumpur. It's not big enough to build anything and it's an awkward shape. We were able to create a place to pot seeds and Guardian hosted the nursery."

As two more founding members of the society join us for the interview, it becomes obvious that all of them come from such diverse backgrounds — there's a television presenter, a managing director of a company, an entrepreneur, an ecologist, a lawyer, magazine editor and brand ambassador.

That said, the one thing they all share is an enormous love for plants and trees.

COMMON PASSION

For instance, Baida talks about the time she spent with her grandparents in Australia. "My parents come from farming stock. On the farm, there were always things to eat, from apricots to raspberries, and what we ate for dinner was often something we grew. My children have known what plants they can or cannot eat since they were 3. They can identify *ulam raja* and basil."

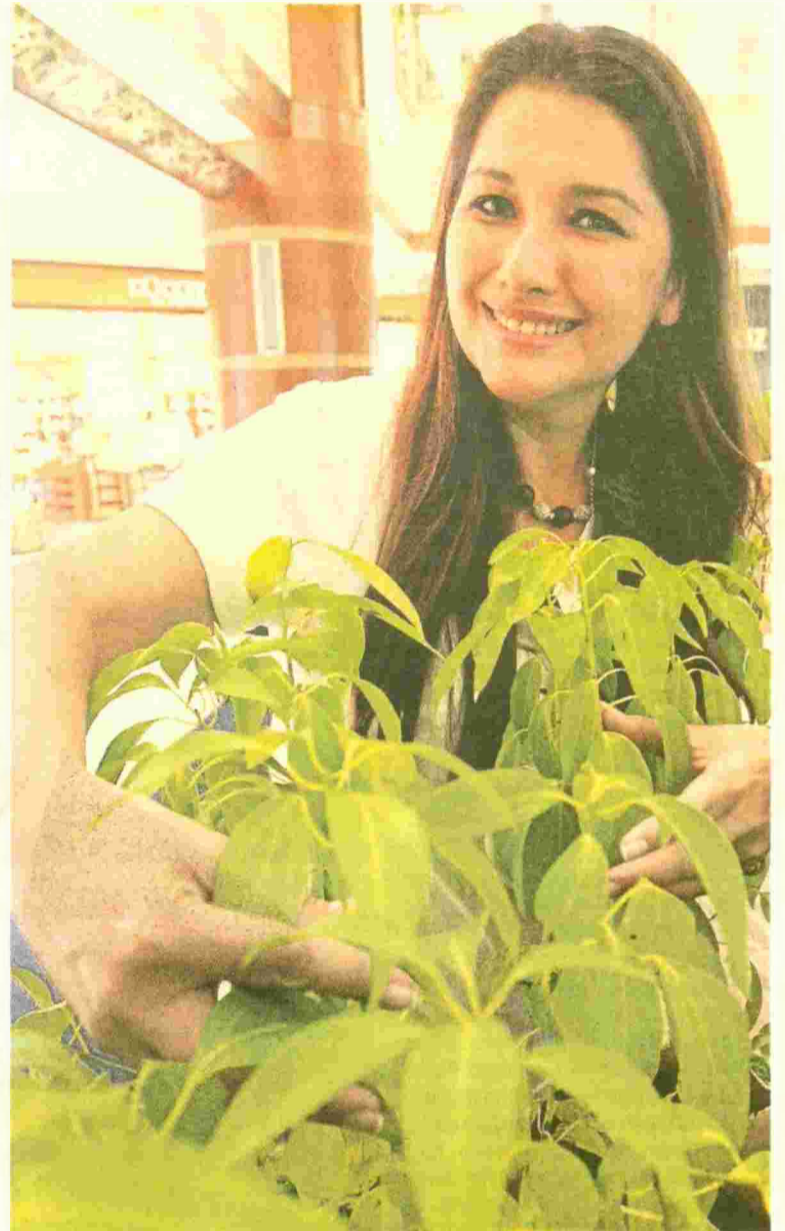
Zai, 30, adds: "Yes, I know what it's like to eat food we've grown. I live in an apartment now, but I grew up in a house. My mum and dad are avid gardeners. We always had food taken from the garden — from herbs to fruit and vegetables. We had mango and kacang botol. Once, we had three weeks' worth of pumpkins and we all said, 'Mum, enough of pumpkins!'"

At this, Bettina nods and says: "I have a similar story. Outside our house, we had a patch of land that was about 20m long. In Sungai Buloh, I found this lovely ground creeper and we planted it. Six months later, it died. I could understand part of it dying but the whole plant? When we dug it up, we realised we'd planted sweet potato."

After the laughter dies down, she adds: "We had 181 tubers of sweet potato. Every neighbour came with bags. That was when I saw how gardens could bring neighbours together."

Surinta, 41, however, is not an avid gardener and neither are her parents. That said, she does add her own touch to the seedlings. "I like to decorate used glass jars. So my friends and family now receive personalised gifts of plant cuttings in recycled, hand-painted glass containers."

As the stories about people and their relationship with plants continue to flow, one is particularly poignant: "I used to live in Bali," says



Bettina Khan believes that gardens can bring neighbours together.



From left, Surinta Abraham, Bettina Khan, Zai Abdul Rahman and Baida Hercus.



HOW TO PLANT A TREE

ARE you a novice at planting trees? Do the seedlings you bring home from the nursery die within a week? Check out the Free Tree Society Kuala Lumpur website (www.freetreesociety.org) which has tips on how to ensure your seedlings survive and thrive.

1. Choose with care the site for planting your tree. You will need space because the tree branches will spread, as will the roots below ground. So make sure you consider the proximity of your trees to surrounding buildings.

2. Dig a hole that is three times as wide as the container in which you brought the seedling home. It must also be deep enough so the base of the tree's trunk will be at

level ground or the plant will not be stable. If it's too low, the trunk may rot and the plant will die.

3. Place your sapling inside this hole. Ensure that it's upright and remains straight.

4. Fill the hole with soil. Do not compact the soil too tightly.

5. Water immediately. This will help the soil to settle. You may need to add more soil after watering.

6. The first few weeks are crucial. Water regularly to ensure the roots retains moisture while new roots spread.

7. Fertilise every month to encourage rapid growth.

8. Protect your tree from lawnmowers, pets, weeds, grass, fire, cars and bikes.

he's open to fostering some plants for us, we can go there and show him how.

"When I had my own house, we didn't plant ready-made trees. Instead, I planted young saplings and watched them grow. I think this teaches us to appreciate plants better.

"Children also benefit from this. When they watch trees grow, often they'll learn that the very first two leaves don't always look like what they'll become. We can also teach children that not everything you plant will grow. Some die. But those which grow and thrive would have had lots of care and attention."

Bettina. "We had a friend, a singer. He said that his mother absolutely adored gardening. She knew every plant, its history and absolutely everything about it. When she died, her son organised the church service. When he came back from the service, he said the whole garden was dead. Nothing had survived."

As the discussion comes to a close, Bettina adds: "A lot of people look at causes then say 'I don't really know how I can help'. What we're saying is, we'll work with you. We'll come up with ways that can help.

"For instance, someone has a plot of land — it doesn't have to big — but doesn't know what to do with it. If