



PIX BY SANJITPAAL SINGH



Nathalie Frossard

MALAYSIA'S PLANT FOR ASIA

THE CHENGAL TREE, ONCE COMMON ACROSS SOUTH EAST ASIA, IS NOW ONLY FOUND IN MALAYSIA. THIS AMAZING HARDWOOD WILL FEATURE IN A SPECIAL EXHIBITION LOOKING AT MAN'S RELATIONSHIP WITH THE PLANET'S PLANTS WRITES **DOUGLAS WILLIAMS**

Nathalie Frossard created the association Plante & Planete in January 2007. The mission of this unique French NGO is to make people aware of how much we owe plants in our daily lives.

"Even if we live in the city plants provide us with clean air, food, shelter, medicines and cosmetics," says Nathalie.

"This link with nature and plants is vital for mankind. I believe that the problem is that in modern life, many of us have lost the awareness of this link and I believe this is closely connected with the current environmental problems facing our planet."

The main focus of P&P is an exhibition, "Vital Vegetal", to be staged next year initially in Paris. This exhibition will showcase five different plant species, one each from the Americas, Europe, Africa, Oceania and Asia.

Nathalie is currently here in Malaysia, home to the magnificent Chengal tree the plant she has selected as her "Asia plant".

The criteria for the selection of each of the species were that they had to be threatened/vulnerable (based in International Union for Conservation of Nature listings) and they must feature prominently in local traditional culture.



The Chengal (*Neobalanocarpus heimii*), an incredibly dense, hardwood with a strong resistance to decay and parasites, has all but disappeared from neighbouring Indonesia and Thailand but is still found here in Malaysia. There is a particularly spectacular example at KL's FRIM.

"I first heard about the Chengal was when I was travelling in Sulawesi," explains Nathalie. "I met a Malaysian traveller, and we talked about the PlanteetPlanete project and she told me about the Chengal tree. I had a few strong contenders at that point but after some research I realised that this was the plant to represent Asia."

Chengal timber was used to build traditional Malay houses and these, if properly cared for, can easily last 200 years. In the past these houses were built on stilts high enough to allow elephants to pass under them. The Chengal timber is so strong that the elephants could rub against the pillars without damaging the house. These Chengal houses are built in such a way that they can be taken down and reassembled in another location, no nails are used, the timber is simply too dense.

In the 1970s Terengganu State had more than 40 boat builders specialising in Chengal boats but that number is now closer to four. Chengal timber is expensive and the tree, even in this tropical climate, takes more than 60 years to mature. Chengal carvings are important historical records, a few skilled craftsmen are trying to keep the art alive. Mr Lee, interviewed by Nathalie in Terengganu said: "These Chengal carvings are our history books. Without these much of our 19th century history would have been lost, since there was no writing at that time." A handful of craftsmen and women are keeping the skill alive today and they are particularly attached to this timber.

"If a person plants a Chengal tree today, chances are they will not live to see it mature, their children might, but they won't, this is a large part of the problem," says Nathalie.

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The other plants that will figure in the exhibition are, for the Americas: Palo Santo (*Bursera graveolens*) from Peru - a wood that's used to ward off evil spirits. "This tree demonstrates the ritual/spiritual use of plants."

For Africa Nathalie has selected the Koko (*Gnetum africanum*) from Gabon. "This is a liana. Its leaves are used in traditional cooking as they are a good source of proteins. This shows the culinary use of plants."

For Europe the plant is Arnica (*Arnica montana*) from France, a medicinal plant used to ease bruising and for sore muscles and ligaments.

Oceania's plant will be selected later this year.

Nathalie is optimistic for the future of Chengals. "The Malaysians that I have discussed the Chengal with have all been single-mindedly determined to ensure the halt in this species' decline."

"The Malaysian Timber Industry Board is helping to support the Chengal boat makers and the carvers. They have realised that if Chengal is used for creating high value items, then there is will be a need to sustain the production of Chengal, people really care about the Chengal tree." FRIM has started a Chengal planting project which looks set to expand. "In my research here in Malaysia I have been heartened by the sense of responsibility felt by many people towards this important tree and I'm confident that it will continue to thrive as a result," concludes Nathalie.



information

www.planteetplanete.org
(French only)

Also see
www.mtib.gov.my
www.frim.gov.my

