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# The man behind the garden concept of cities

By BAVANI M

TWENTY years ago, entrepreneur Datuk A Halim Ali rented 50 acres of land in the outskirts of Semenyih, which is a two-hour drive from the federal capital and turned it into a flower farm.

Today, the farm dedicated to producing lowland flowering plants is not only the biggest in Malaysia, but is touted to be one of the largest in South-East Asia with business in the Gulf, Singapore, Brunei and Britain.

And, through his company Brightmark Sdn Bhd, he has turned almost every city and town in the country into a garden city bursting with flowers and colours all year around.



Field of blooms: Halim stands in a field of cosmos ladybirds.

Halim's story began during a visit to a London park in the summer of 1987.

"There was something grossly lacking in our local landscaping scene. We have beautiful parks but they all had one weakness — there were hardly any flowers and colour," the 51-year-old recalled.

After the inspiring visit, Halim took a detour to Holland, a country renowned for its beautiful flower gardens as well as being one of the top producers of flower seeds in the world.

"It was an enlightening trip as I also discovered that our climate of endless sunshine is perfect for the growth of lowland flowering plants and that we, too, could have beautiful parks," he said.

Armed with that knowledge, and a tenacity that few possessed, he had to convince the government that Malaysian gardens and parks were important tourism products.



**Tender care: A worker checking on the progress of trays of petunias that have just sprouted.**

He argued that in any developing country, landscaping was used as a yardstick to measure how much progress a town or city has attained and the level of quality of life that the place offered its population.

“In London, I was smitten by the beauty and colour of the gardens and parks there and I saw the opportunity to venture into that segment of the industry,” he said.

His so-called niche, which later became the key to his success, is the ability to apply mathematical precision to produce the right flowers and colours at the appointed time.

Halim introduced the Flower and Colour concept to the Kuala Lumpur City Hall in 1989.

After having gone through the tender board, his company was awarded the contract for coming up with the lowest pricing and innovative ideas.

His maiden task was to beautify the high- profile Dataran Merdeka for the 1989 CHOGM event (Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting).

After the success of CHOGM, Halim’s Flower and Colour concept was soon adopted in most cities and towns in the country, and during the early 1990s he was also frequently invited to beautify Kuala Lumpur for international events.

Word of his beautiful gardens spread and soon came an offer to handle the landscaping and beautification of the Palm Island project in Dubai – touted as the 8th Wonder of the World.

But the real victory came about in 2002 when the government issued a directive to all local authorities nationwide to ensure that at least 30% of plants grown in public places have flowers.

In 2007, the government signed a memorandum of understanding to form a joint-venture with Halim’s company, MARDitech Corporation Sdn Bhd and Sygenta from the Netherlands, a leading research and development company in horticulture and the world’s biggest producer of flowers, to turn Putrajaya into a floral city.

***Footnote: Datuk Halim is the Chairman of the Board of Governors of Malacca High School. He was a former student.***