



SPECIAL GARDEN ... herbs nurtured by Liew (from left) pokok duit-duit, the toothache plant, the dragon tail and mas cotek, all used traditionally to treat various ailments.

Man devoted to medicinal plants

By CHRISTINA KOH

IPOH: Mention any medicinal plant and retired vice-principal Liew Shou Lin, 63, can tell you at least two of their other names and what they are good for.

What began as a fascination during his schoolboy days has since developed into a lifelong study and the development of a near-unparalleled knowledge of medicinal plants.

Today, the man who pioneered exhibitions of herbal plants in Ipoh in the 1970s and helping spread interest in them throughout Perak, is highly sought after by local community members for advice on various ailments.

However, since his retirement from the teaching profession in 1994, Penang-born Liew prefers to keep a low profile at his house in Ipoh Garden South.

"Actually, I don't usually receive visitors and prefer to entertain only those with appointments. If someone very sick comes to me and I think I can help, I will do what I can," he said.

For those seeking his expertise, locating his house is an experience in itself.

The front gate is almost hidden by a small jungle of ferns and other plants Liew had grown for some purpose or other.

Liew's Shangri La, however, is a special garden he tends in a secluded hillock deep in the jungle where he grows his favourite herbs or plants useful for specific ailments.

Learning about the properties of herbs can be intriguing. Take, for instance, *pokok duit-duit* or *phyllocladus pulchellum*, thought useful for treating swollen spleen or liver, rheumatic pain, malaria and excessive vaginal bleeding.

Or the herb English Man's Foot or *plantago major* whose juice Liew recommends for treating a blocked urinary tract.

"Another plant, the rock fern known as *paku batu* in Malay and by its scientific name *selaginella doederleinii*, is used to treat cancers for the nose, liver, stomach, intestines and lungs.

"It's also good for sinusitis,



HEALING PLANT ... Liew pointing out the rock fern *selaginella doederleinii* used traditionally to treat various forms of cancer.

tonsillitis, pharyngitis, bronchitis, pneumonitis, hepatitis, cirrhosis, cholecystitis, urinary tract infection and coughs," he said while pointing out the pretty but otherwise unremarkable-looking plant.

Despite his vast expertise, Liew is quick to stress he never claims to perform "miracles".

Instead, he pointed out that the plants are traditional remedies thought to be good for treating or having the potential to treat specific illnesses.

Liew's interest dates back to the age of 10 when he watched people with various ailments coming from around Air Itam to consult

his mother Hew Chin Thye.

Hew would direct him or his brother to gather a particular herb or plant usually found in vacant plots, jungle fringes or even around their house.

"I remember a fishmonger once came to my mother with complaints of ulcers and boils on his back which were so painful he couldn't sleep properly.

"She asked my brother to collect a herb for the man to be applied on his back and the next morning he came by again to tell my mother that it was the first time he was able to get a good night's sleep," he recalled.

Liew added that his mother was illiterate but had observed how railway construction

workers, who had no medical support, had treated themselves with certain wild plants when they fell sick.

He soon came to realise he was picking up a treasure trove of knowledge on medicinal plants that was usually overlooked, especially that on plants mistaken as mere weeds.

"I wanted to properly document the plants, but in order to do this, I needed knowledge in medicine," he said.

In 1977, Liew, who has two sons and a daughter with his wife, retired teacher Low Siew Choo, began a four-year programme at Perak Institute of Chinese Medicine while still engaged in his teaching career.

He first taught science and mathematics as a temporary teacher in Negri Sembilan in 1958 before pursuing a Bachelor of Arts degree in Economics at Universiti Malaya in 1965.

Three years later, he settled in Ipoh where he became vice-principal of Sekolah Tunku Abdul Rahman in 1977 and eventually senior assistant of SMK Menglambu in 1980.

It was there that he formed the Junior Herbalist Club in 1985, the first of its kind in the country.

"At that time, (deputy prime minister) Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi, who was then Education Minister, was encouraging

schools to organise societies and extra co-curricular activities for students to engage in healthy activities," he noted.

The club became a hit with students who were taught to recognise common herbs in and around the school and they even created their own herbal garden at the school.

It is easy to mistake Liew for a recluse, but he actually keeps himself busy documenting herbs and researching folk medicine.

"Most of my research is sociological. Part of it involves travelling to *kampung*s to discuss with the village elders what they know about remedies using local plants," he said.

He had previously worked with staff of Forest Research Institute of Malaysia and Universiti Malaya in documenting local herbs.

Over the years, he amassed numerous books and other literature on the field from many countries, and being competent in Chinese, English and Bahasa Malaysia, he has been able to document the medicinal properties of plants.

In the course of his work, he records the names of medicinal plants, be it in Chinese, English or Bahasa Malaysia, and what they are known as in other countries, including their scientific name in Latin.

Considered the foremost local authority on the subject in Perak, he has given talks and written many articles on herbal medicine for newspapers and magazines.

At one time, he had a column, The Herbal Way to Health, in Singapore's *Female*.

Three years ago, Chung Hua Institute of Chinese Medicine in Kuching appointed him a visiting lecturer and later made him consultant herbalist and ethnobotanist for his technical assistance in setting up a herb garden.

On future projects, Liew said: "I am currently co-authoring a book on local medicinal plants which have the potential to treat cancer. It's difficult and tedious to write a book on the subject.

"Others have tried to compile all the material on herbs and medicinal plants in one volume but there are often many mistakes," he said.