

# Engaging Seniors in Community Building: The Bukit Panjang Resident Gardener Programme

text and images by  
Benny Tong

additional images  
As credited

“

Singaporean seniors are a heterogeneous demographic that hold a wide and complex basket of ideas and concerns about what constitutes “successful ageing”.

This study investigates the central role that horticulture and landscaping, which I view as a kind of what the sociologist Robert Stebbins (2020) terms as serious leisure pursuit and devotee work, had played for a group of senior landscapers in the Bukit Panjang Town Council’s (BPTC) Resident Gardener Programme. Drawing upon participant-observation fieldwork and semi-structured interviews carried out in 2020 with 16 resident gardeners aged between 60 and 81, I discuss how they formed and maintained social connections with each other and the wider Bukit Panjang community through their pursuits of horticulture and landscaping. Particularly, I highlight how their shared backgrounds of being former farmers in evicted villages fuelled the construction of a “kampung spirit” that encouraged and maintained communal connections in old age, and provided innovative ways of rethinking models of senior employment straddling concepts of leisure and work.

## **Social Connection and Community in Ageing Singapore**

Singapore’s population is rapidly ageing, and seniors increasingly live apart from their children (Department of Statistics 2020). While the overarching position of the Government remains to emphasise the continued economic participation of seniors, and the provision of social and financial support by the family, it has also taken concrete policy action to address issues related to ageing. Most notably, the Government has rolled out the Pioneer and Merdeka Generation Programmes for those born before 1960. However, the programmes’ healthcare focus has also meant less attention on other areas of seniors’ well-being, with only the Merdeka Generation Package offering a one-off \$100 credit for “active ageing programs”. Thus, there remains much leeway towards offering greater support for long-term sustained involvement in pursuits that promote active engagements in old age.



**Fig 1 & 2.**

Landscapes in Bukit Panjang estate maintained by residents under the Resident Gardener Programme.

“

Many seniors are interested in questions about staying socially connected to their wider community.

Indeed, recent research, such as by Feng and Straughan (2017), has revealed that while health and welfare issues are important, Singaporean seniors are a heterogeneous demographic that hold a wide and complex basket of ideas and concerns about what constitutes “successful ageing”. Particularly, many seniors are interested in questions about staying socially connected to their wider community. For example, in explaining their participation, the BPTC Resident Gardeners talked about the evocation of memories of their life histories as former farmers and villagers, along with their aspirations for their current lives as seniors in the urban Bukit Panjang community. This study sought to uncover the ways in which these strands of thought about identity and community came together to produce innovative outcomes in the areas of senior engagement and employment.



“

They said they had honed such expertise through their former work as rural farmers in the nearby areas of Lim Chu Kang and Mandai, before their villages were re-purposed for military usage in the 1980s.

**Fig 3.**

Photo of the researcher joining the Resident Gardeners in their landscaping activities.  
(Image credit. T.J.)

### Studying the Resident Gardener Programme as “Serious Leisure”

Many of the Resident Gardeners described their horticultural interests as a form of leisure, something that they “played” with (玩玩的). Thus, I conceptually situate their mode of activity within the context of leisure, defined by Stebbins (2015: 4) as “the experience of satisfaction and fulfilment, and the activities that bring about this experience”. However, theirs was not just any kind of leisure (随便), but something that they put effort and seriousness into (认真). Hence, I also refer conceptually to Stebbins’ (2015: xx) idea of serious leisure, defined as follows: “a systematic pursuit of an amateur, hobbyist, or volunteer core activity sufficiently substantial, interesting and fulfilling in nature for the participant to find a career there acquiring and expressing a combination of its special skills, knowledge, and experience”.

To holistically understand how the Resident Gardeners’ participation contributed to their feelings of life satisfaction and fulfilment, I chose to study them using ethnographic research methods that paid greater attention to their thoughts and motivations. My ethnographic research activities firstly involved on-the-ground observations of and participating in the actual landscaping activities. This component was conducted over about 20 sessions from February to November 2020. I came into the landscaping activities with no prior background in horticulture or farming, so all the tasks were new to me, and I used some of my own sensations (of fatigue and soreness) to inform my understanding of the physical and mental facets of the activities. My lack of experience also primed me to ask about actions and behaviour that the Resident Gardeners often took for granted. I then supplemented the participant-observation data with one-on-one semi-structured interviews with 10 Resident Gardeners, where I learnt about the members’ backgrounds, motivations, and other thoughts about their participation in the program.

### The Bukit Panjang Resident Gardener Programme

The Resident Gardener programme was established for the town's residents in 2015 by Dr Teo Ho Pin, the then-MP for Bukit Panjang. The BPTC continues to operate the programme through a contractor company, which oversees employing the Resident Gardeners and work progress. As such, the programme straddles both ideas of leisure and work.

The members are all residents in Bukit Panjang: many are close neighbours living in nearby apartments who already knew about each other. The age range of the gardeners during my fieldwork was between 60-81. There are 4 female and 11 male members split into 3 teams working around Bukit Panjang. The teams are led by two on-the-ground leaders: 65-year-old female TJ who oversees one group, and 64-year-old male Kim who oversees two groups.

The Resident Gardeners engage in the landscaping work every weekday, typically in the morning. Their scope of responsibilities include trimming and pruning of shrubs, flowers, and plants; removing weeds by tilling the soil around the plants; and cleaning up the trimmings. During the fieldwork, they often explained to me how they gave individual attention to the plants and soil through their expert knowledge and care. They said they had honed such expertise through their former work as rural farmers in the nearby areas of Lim Chu Kang and Mandai, before their villages were re-purposed for military usage in the 1980s. Even after being re-housed in Bukit Panjang's apartments, they maintained hobby interests in horticultural activities, working with greenery in community or home gardens.

Indeed, the idea behind the establishment of the Resident Gardener program was to tap on the interests and passion of the many horticultural enthusiasts in Bukit Panjang, and their shared background growing up in rural farms. It sought to develop that interest and background into paid work that involved a larger scale of activity, as explained by a feature story in the TC's newsletter in 2016. The development of hobby interests into employment can be seen as a case of what Stebbins (2014) calls "devotee work", which also blurs the boundary between leisure and work. Indeed, the participants often reminded me that they were serious about the work, but also knew how to have fun while doing so.

**Fig 4.**  
Some members of the Resident Gardeners Programme.



## Taking Ownership of the Resident Gardener Programme

The Resident Gardeners, particularly the two team leaders TJ and Kim, were given considerable freedom to run the programme by the contracting company and BPTC; they only reported back to the contracting company on the work done after each day's work. The Resident Gardeners took the opportunity to claim a large degree of ownership of their activities. For example, they organised their own work schedules and areas, while being mindful of expected standards. They also took creative initiative by transplanting or replanting flowers and plants, according to their own evaluation of the soil conditions and the surrounding environment and aesthetics. They felt that their interventions were sometimes necessary, because of the deterioration of some plots over time due to the weather or being placed in unsuitable areas.

The Resident Gardeners often helped with tasks beyond their scope of responsibility whenever they could. Particularly during the Circuit Breaker period in 2020, they volunteered to take on additional tasks, such as cutting overgrown grass and overhanging leaves near their usual working areas. These tasks were usually done by migrant worker teams employed by BPTC, whose on-site work had been suspended during the period.

In explaining their motivations, TJ said, "I believe in doing good for others while I still can, it makes everybody happier. It's good karma and making merit." Other Resident Gardeners, such as Tan and Kim in the other work teams, echoed these altruistic desires, and indeed the Resident Gardener work in general has beautified Bukit Panjang. "Sometimes, the people from BPTC, or even just regular residents, will treat us to coffee or give us small gifts to show their appreciation!" The Resident Gardener activities thus not only fulfilled the members' altruistic desires, but also enabled them to accrue some social recognition from the community.

**Fig 6.**  
Kim inspecting his team's work at the end of a session.



**Fig 5.** TJ tending to some flowers.



**Fig 7.**  
Resident Gardener team at  
work replanting a plot.



“

The Resident Gardener activities thus not only fulfilled the members' altruistic desires, but also enabled them to accrue some social recognition from the community.

### **Expressing “Kampung Spirit” through Landscaping**

The Resident Gardeners all described their activities as physically hard work (很辛苦), with their tasks involving heavy lifting, squatting, and bending. They generally moved around a lot while exposed to the elements. To describe their physically taxing workload, they often compared their hectic schedule to “fighting a war” (打仗). However, they generally remained in good spirits throughout, chatting and laughing as they worked despite the heat, humidity, and fatigue. As they often emphasised, “We work seriously, but playfully too!”

I asked various members from TJ's and Kim's teams how they could keep their spirits up. Without any prior mutual discussion, each of them explained along these lines:

“Only former farmers like us will appreciate this kind of hard work toiling with the soil. More ‘refined’ (斯文) people, those who grew up in the city, usually drop out only after a few days or even a few hours! They find it too hard compared to usual gardening.”

The team leaders, TJ and Kim, also described how many newcomers struggled with the harsh conditions, learning the necessary skills, and getting along with the team members. Indeed, during the fieldwork, they were pleasantly surprised by my interest in their activities and my ability to keep up with them most of the time.

In other words, they suggested that while it was easy to pick up home gardening as a relaxing leisure activity, only those with rural backgrounds and an aptitude for hard physical work, like them, were able to develop that interest into larger scale landscaping activities that required regular working hours. In this way, they seemed to be describing their level of involvement in horticulture as an expression of a kind of “kampung spirit”, built up through the recalling of their shared backgrounds in the former villages in Lim Chu Kang and Mandai.



**Fig 8.**  
TJ sitting proudly with some of the plots her team tends to.

“

Through their activities, members like TJ, Tan, and Kim were able to fulfil their altruistic desires by contributing to the landscaping and beautification of Bukit Panjang. Their activities were recognised and appreciated by the Town Council and even other residents.

### **The Resident Gardener Programme as a Way to Keep Seniors Engaged in the Community**

In analysing the Resident Gardener Programme activities, I want to highlight arguments that leisure can act as a crucial space for the moulding of self and social identities, particularly in old age and its temporal structure of “empty”/“unstructured” time outside of professional work and/or family duties. This point was most highlighted by the resident gardeners, who listed as their key motivation for participating the desire to spend/fill in the time (打发时间).

Scholars such as Agahi, Ahacic & Parker (2006) have also argued that leisure is situated within wider socio-historical and biographical contexts, despite often acting as an “escape” from other daily life activities. For the Resident Gardeners, such contexts were crucial in explaining why they chose a long-term pursuit of horticulture at the level of large-scale landscaping activities, as seen in their recalling of their former rural lives as a central narrative to explain their continued participation and the inability of most newcomers to settle in.

Through their participation, the Resident Gardeners created a social network among themselves based on two points of recognition. Firstly, they recognised each other as fellow residents/ neighbours and horticultural enthusiasts in Bukit Panjang, who came together to help beautify the town. Secondly, through their activities, members like TJ, Tan, and Kim were able to fulfil their altruistic desires by contributing to the landscaping and beautification of Bukit Panjang. Their activities were recognised and appreciated by the Town Council and even other residents.

The Resident Gardeners also attained a sense of social connection to the wider Bukit Panjang community. Through their activities, members like TJ, Tan, and Kim were able to fulfil their altruistic desires by contributing to the landscaping and beautification of Bukit Panjang. Their activities were recognised and appreciated by the Town Council and even other residents.

## Enabling Resident Gardener Programmes to Contribute to Seniors' Community Engagement

The ability of the Resident Gardener programme to enable these positive community outcomes rested upon a good matching of the provision of activities and work with the members' interests, skills, and motivations. The BPTC and contractors' largely hands-off approach in running the program was also important in generating the autonomy needed by the Resident Gardeners to organise themselves in ways that enabled their fulfilment and expression of solidarity.

However, the personal backgrounds of the members and the history of the Bukit Panjang community also have many unique elements. How can the findings then be generalised for future Resident Gardener programmes in other towns in Singapore? An accurate identification of the potential target groups of Resident Gardeners and an understanding of their desires and motivations, as BPTC and its contractor have been able to do, will be crucial.

**Fig 9.**  
A rooftop garden tended to by the Resident Gardeners.



The following questions will contribute to developing such understandings:

1. Which Singaporean seniors are able to harness previous life experiences for meaningful pursuits? Why are some more able to do this than others?
2. Who constructs what kinds of meanings and identities through such activities in old age?
3. How do personal and communal contexts and ideas of place and history influence these constructions of meaning and identity?

The answers to these questions will provide important hints for encouraging seniors' continued employment, happier lifestyles in old age, and greater social cohesion within neighbourhoods and communities can be conceptualised from a ground-up approach. While the wide popularity of gardening and horticultural activities amongst Singaporean seniors is promising, care should be taken to not overgeneralise their motivations, but instead to recognise the varied motivations for and ways in which they engage in these interests.

## REFERENCES

- Agahi, Neda, Kozma Ahacic & Marti G. Parker. 2006. Continuity of Leisure Participation from Middle Age to Old Age. *Journal of Gerontology Series B: Psychological Sciences and Social Sciences* 61(6): S340-S346.
- Department of Statistics (Singapore). 2021. *Population Trends 2020*.
- Feng, Qiushi & Paulin Tay Straughan. 2017. What Does Successful Aging Mean? Lay Perception of Successful Aging among Elderly Singaporeans. *Journal of Gerontology Series B: Psychological Sciences and Social Sciences* 72(6): 204-213.
- Stebbins, Robert. 2015. *Serious Leisure: A Perspective for Our Time*. New Brunswick: Transaction Publishers.
- Stebbins, Robert. 2014. *Careers in Serious Leisure: From Dabbler to Devotee in Search of Fulfilment*. Houndmills, Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Stebbins, Robert. 2020. *The Serious Leisure Perspective: A Synthesis*. Houndmills, Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.