CUGE Schemes for Landscape Industry Development: A Strong Shade of Green

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It has been 50 years since Singapore’s leaders embarked on a campaign to green the city. In 1963, then Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew planted a Hempaa tree (Chrysophyllum ovoum) in what was then a roundabout at the junction of Farrer Road and Holland Road. It marked the beginning of a tree-planting and greening campaign that would change the character of urbanised areas in Singapore and deeply impact the nation’s economy.

Historically, the push for a “Garden City” of pervious greenery (and now for “a City in a Garden”) has been top-down in nature. The first annual tree-planting day was held in 1971. The Garden City Action Committee (GCAC) was assembled in the late 1960s and constituted high-level officials from various government agencies, who heard reports on greening efforts and issued directives to boost the greening cause. The Parks and Recreation Department (PRD)—the first agency devoted to greening-related issues—was formed in 1976. Merging with the PRD, the National Parks Board (NParks) was formed in 1990, with a particular emphasis on parks.

The Industry Takes Root

“Today, there is a clear indication that the idea of urban greening, although required and encouraged by the government in the form of streetscapes and urban greening, although required and encouraged by the government, has been firmly implanted in the Singaporean consciousness,” says Chong. “It’s not to say that the government is spending less; it’s just that the private sector may be growing faster. I think that will be the trend going forward.”

In the past, most of Singapore’s greenery was invested by the government in the form of streetscapes and urban greening, although required and encouraged by the government, has been firmly implanted in the Singaporean consciousness. The Parks and Recreation Department (PRD)—the first agency devoted to greening-related matters—was formed in 1976. Merging with the PRD, the National Parks Board (NParks) was formed in 1990, with a particular emphasis on parks.

The industry’s revenue has been growing at a rate of around five percent per year since 2010, says Chong. Productivity levels, however, need to be raised in order for labour productivity to grow. While improvements to productivity are being called for across the board in Singapore, Chong says that within the landscape industry, “it is very evident that we need to do something about productivity because some things are still being done in ways that could be improved.”

Aiming to transform the landscape industry, the Landscape Productivity Roadmap (developed by CUGE together with the industry) has the goal of improving productivity by 2.5 percent per annum over the next 10 years. “We are looking at four different areas,” says Chong. “First, we help the industry’s managers and leaders to change their mindset about productivity. We conduct productivity study trips overseas to illustrate the ways that things can be done. Second, we encourage increased mechanisation and innovation. For example, we ask, Can you use a ride-on mower that allows one person to do the job of four people using hand-held mowers?”

Chong continues, “Third, we encourage best practices and high standards. We organised the GreenUrbanScape event in November to bring together the industry’s players from around the world to network and share best practices and latest trends. We’ve also released a set of guidelines for the productive maintenance and sustainability of landscape designs, and we’ve introduced a scheme for the accreditation of nurseries. And fourth, we encourage manpower development—a bottom-up approach to improving the industry via skills training.”

At the center of the CUGE Industry Development branch and the Landscape Productivity Roadmap are the Landscape Productivity Grant Scheme and Nursery Accreditation Scheme. Among those handled by the latter are the Certified Practising Horticulturist Programme and Landscape Excellence Assessment Framework (LEAF).

Nursery Accreditation Scheme

The scheme was introduced in September 2013 and will be effective until March 2016, or until the scheme’s funds have been fully disbursed, whichever is earlier. It covers five major areas of productivity improvements: mechanisation and innovation (encouraging greater adoption of mechanisation for the improvement of workflow and processes); Nursery Innovation (for the adoption of nursery technologies to improve capabilities and maximise returns from the land); Operations Improvement (for automation systems that will improve resource allocation, reduce supervision requirements, and enhance quality and consistency); Weeds Control (for more effective control of weed growth and time management); and Housing and Development (for the adoption of HR solution packages and the reduction of time taken for manual tracking and documentation).

The scheme is iterative, and begins with the provision of a preparation booklet. Once the nursery has readied itself for compliance, assessors will visit. Time will be provided for any final points of compliance before accreditation is granted. A list of accredited nurseries can be found on the CUGE website.

Nursery Accreditation Scheme assessors command a premium out of what they’re handling. Subject to conditions, the scheme allows a nursery to establish itself as “managed in accordance with the CUGE’s standards,” says Chong. It is a certification that is important for the individual nurseries and the landscape industry, says Chong, Malaysian nurseries are typically receptive to the scheme. Currently, around 20 percent of Singaporean nurseries are accredited, along with three from Malaysia. “We’ll try to reach 70 or 80 percent in the next five years or so,” says Chong. “We want to see if nurseries are able to command a premium out of what they’re doing. Profitability and revenue growth are important for the individual nurseries and the industry as a whole,” he adds.

Certified Practising Horticulturist Programme

“Despite the proactive greening that has happened in Singapore over the last 50 years, people have been practising in the landscape industry with a variety of approaches,” says Shamril Jamil, Deputy Director of the Manpower Development branch at CUGE. He continues, “Also, we have had people practising with impressive skills and competencies but without recognition for them. We developed the Certified Practising Horticulturist Programme, and other professional certification programmes, to make sure that the industry moves forward with skills of a certain standard, and also to raise the profile of the industry and its people.”

Says Shamril, “There’s an art and a science to horticulture and people who have completed the certified Practising Horticulturist Programme are recognised internationally for their skills and knowledge.” Furthermore, with contracts from NParks and other agencies requiring professional certifications to be held by service providers, best-practice standards are being officially called for across Singapore.

The Certified Practising Horticulturist Programme is an intensive 10-day refresher cum-training course (with assessment) for practising horticulturists that is accredited by the Australian Institute of Horticulture. It is open to horticulturists with contracts from NParks and other agencies requiring professional certifications. It presents an overview of the landscape industry, and construction. It also presents an overview of the landscape industry.
practising horticulturists from NParks and Singapore’s private industry. The course also attracts participants from the region—from as far as Hong Kong.

A View from Industry

Lilian Kwok, who is the Assistant Director of Industry, management at NParks’ Horticulture Standards and Management Branch, runs the Pasir Panjang Nursery where some 200,000 plants are produced per year for NParks and other agencies. Kwok has been practising horticulture for 33 years. Her own experience of the Certified Practising Horticulturist Programme provided a reinforcement of her own approach as well as an emphasis on new standards, such as the use of weed mat.

The soil module was of particular interest. She explains, “Everything starts with the soil. A lot of people might use the wrong soil and then wonder why the plants don’t do well. The Certified Practising Horticulturist Programme reminds us of the need to plan ahead before selecting soils, as well as the implications of the different soils with regard to fertiliser application.” In particular, says Kwok, the programme “encourages younger up-and-coming horticulturists to embrace the standards we’ve always adhered to”.

She has observed the emergence of positive outcomes from CUGE’s training programmes. “Generally I would say that the skill level of the workers in our nursery—and those of our contractors—has gone up. I see an improvement in standards overall, as well as a lift in image for landscape technicians. They are no longer called gardeners or foremen. They feel proud to be called landscape technicians, and they have the option of progressing in their career path.”

However, she comments, progression of study, all the way to degree courses is lacking in Singapore. Kwok believes in a diploma course, and finds that many of her graduating students are keen to further their studies. They feel proud to be called landscape technicians, and they have the option of progressing in their career path.”

Growing History

“One of my first projects with NParks [then the PRD],” recalls Kwok, “was the walkway planting along Shenton Way. Previously there were no plants. In those days we used to work even on Saturdays, just to finish our projects. We had a tight timeline for Shenton Way. Once the Public Works people had finished the walkways and the pipes were in, we did the soil work followed by the planting. Come Monday, wow, you could see the change. The entire street was done. All the walkways you see now are the result of that initiative to beautify the central business district.”

Continuing the story of Singapore’s greening requires the continual growth of its landscape workforce. Attracting people to the industry however can be challenging. In Kwok’s words, “You have to feel something for the plants. You have to be happy to come to work every morning, in spite of the rain and the sun.”

On 7 September 2013, the annual Green Thumbs event was held at ITE College East. At the event, a memorandum of understanding was signed by NParks, Institute of Technical Education (ITE), and Landscape Industry Association (Singapore) (LIAS) to award 50 scholarships to help develop a pool of highly trained students for careers in the landscape industry. The scholarships are worth $600,000 over five years and funded by NParks’ Garden City Fund and LIAS. They will assist students studying ITE’s two-year NITEC (National Institute of Technical Education Certification) in Factory Technology (Landscape Services) course. To aid curriculum development, NParks and LIAS will share expertise in landscape services and related disciplines.

Combined with measures to increase productivity and recognisability, the development of landscape-focused courses catering to groups ranging from school leavers to practising professionals indicates effective steps toward a strong and healthy landscape industry. “Perhaps one day there could be a tie-up with a university to offer a degree course in Singapore,” suggests Kwok, to continue the progression already underway in the industry.

More information on the programmes discussed in this article can be found at cuge.com.sg.

Inaugural LEAF-Certified Developments 2013

New Developments

Canals at Vingcon

Developer: Keppel Bay Pte Ltd

Newton Suites

Developer: Housing & Development Board

The Interlace

An integrated concept led by Capitaland Hotel Properties, and a third shareholder
Team members: RSP Architects Planners & Engineers (Pte) Ltd, ICDN Design International Pte Ltd, Woh Hup (Private) Limited, and Blooms & Greens Pte Ltd

The Rainforest

Chun An City Developments Limited and TID Pte Ltd
Team members: ADDP Architects LLP, GONGANG Pte Ltd, and Nakao Singapore Pte Ltd

Existing Developments

158 Cecil Street

Developer: Alpha Investment Partners Ltd, Singapore

Khoo Teck Puat Hospital

Developer: Alexandra Health Pte Ltd
Team members: PM Link Pte Ltd, CPG Consultants, Pendaan Asia Pte Ltd, Hyundai Engineering & Construction Co Ltd, and Tropical Environment Pte Ltd

Pangshan Grove

Developer: Housing and Development Board
Team member: Town Council

Siloso Beach Resort

Developer: Siloso Beach Resort
Team member: Tan + Tofani Architects

1. Vertical Greenery in 158 Cecil Street offices (Photo: Alpha Investment Partners).

2. Vegetative scales in The Rainforest condominium (Photo: City Developments Ltd).

3. View inside Siloso Beach Resort, where architecture and nature are blended (Photo: Siloso Beach Resort).

4. Set amidst verdant landscapes, Khoo Teck Puat Hospital embodies both a “hospital in a garden” and “a garden in a hospital” (Photo: Khoo Teck Puat Pusat Hospital).