

# Gampaha Botanical Gardens

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*At the Orchid House. Photo - Fred R. Malvenna.*

The Henerathgoda Botanical Gardens or Gampaha Gardens as it is better known is the Botanical Gardens situated closest to Colombo and the only one of its kind in the low country. The Royal Botanic Gardens at Peradeniya in the Central hills and Hakgala gardens in the mountain and more temperate zone close to Nuwara Eliya are the other two. Sited on a 35 acre (14.16 hec) land the beautifully laid out botanical gardens has a fine collection of exotic and indigenous flora providing spectacles of extraordinary beauty and absorbing interest for the serious botanist, nature lover and casual visitor. It was opened in 1876 and is believed to have been originally intended to receive the first Para Rubber (*Hevea Brasillensis*) plants sent through the Royal Botanic Gardens at Kew in England. Henerathgoda gardens boasts of a wide variety of palms, flowering trees and shrubs originating in tropical countries such as China, Java, Phillipines, Malaysia, India and South America in addition to the diverse local collection. The main attraction of the Gampaha Gardens is the 108 year old Rubber Tree which grows alongside the Palm Circle. by the Cultural drive.

The tree labelled No. 6 was the first rubber tree to be tapped in Asia for the latex and was grown from seed smuggled from Brazil. It is widely believed that it was this tree that provided the first seedlings what developed into the large rubber plantations of Sri Lanka and Malaysia. To the botanist. the Gampaha Gardens is a place of plenty. It often supplies the visitor with an unbelievably extensive variety of sub-tropical and temperate flora, and vegetation varying from 'patanas' to trees like Aralu (*Terminalia chebula*), Bulu (*Terminalia bellivica*), Nelli (*Phyllanthus emblica*), trees significant to the Ayurvedic pharmacopoea and also offers many a picnic spot under the cool inviting shade of tall majestic trees. Sri Lanka has been known through the ages for its spices and aromatics -cinnamon, nutmeg, pepper, vanilla, cardamom and citronella which grows abundantly in the wet zone lowlands and hills. The spice garden at Gampaha Gardens has its impressive collection of spices making it one of the best spice gardens in the region. Here a visitor could see and smell the cinnamon bark still on the tree and crush a few clove leaves for its spicy odour. See pepper vines climb tall trees and nutmeg ripen on large shady trees. Valuable timber trees here include the famous Burma Teak. Satinwood which has been used in furniture from ancient days, Jak (*Artocarpus Heterophyllus*) the strong wood preferred by Sri Lankans for construction, and many others found in the dense tropical jungles of the island.

The air filled with the heavy scent of pine is indeed refreshing and inviting on a warm tropical afternoon as the visitor approaches the fruit tree section of the Botanical Gardens. Tropical fruit trees are found here in plenty, from the several species of mango, to avocado pears, mangosteens, sapodillas, rambutans, custard apples and the little pink rose apples. Here in an orchard of fruit, there is also grapefruit, lemon and lime and creepers of passion fruit. The Rose Gardens which was started recently has an exciting collection. The dazzling array of roses white, pink, red, big and small, blossoming into their lovely forms paint a pretty picture of a well tended pocket of beauty, tastefully landscaped. The labours of those who tend the gardens have produced plants that not only provide a fascinating display of colour amidst the dominant tropical greenery which abounds. Among the most colourful are the many crotons, some with leaves that are yellow or red or splashed with white or orange markings, so many colours and patterns, tempting the visitor to seek the sales outlet where plants could be bought at very reasonable prices. The dazzling variety of Caladiums is another attraction of the Gampaha Gardens. Caladiums offering unusually colourful foliage, combining red, pink, white and green hold the attention of the plant lovers, not only by their exotic colours but also by their 'fancy leaved' finish\_ with long leaves, often shaped like gigantic spearheads.

A touch of purple and one looks hard, baffled by the beautiful bright leaves glistening in the sun, to discover 'Purple Heart' which derive their name from the colour of their leaves. The purple tones on the top surfaces which are highlighted by barely visible, extremely fine bristles that look truly fascinating, thrive in the sunlight waving their slender stems in the slight breeze. Dracaenas which display an amazing diversity in foliage, is another prominent garden decorator found at Heneratgoda. The "Umbrella plant" quite popular in Sri Lanka with leaves that radiate from the tops of bare slender stalks, arching downward, like the ribs of an umbrella, is a great hit among plant lovers who visit the Gardens. Its dwarf variety too is quite popular. Rows and rows of Pleomele or "Song of India" is also an eye catching plant with the narrow leaved pleomele sporting green leathery leaves with cream-yellow edges and the broader one with very conspicuous, thick yellow linings. Plant lovers are also captivated by the famous aluminium plant" with its shiny bright green quilted leaves,adorning the edges of the flower beds of the gardens. The gorgeous Japanese Garden which has a Japanese setting and a collection of lovely Japanese and Lankan plants, is laid according to the Green Garden system, and the student's garden has more than 100 endemic and

indigenous medicinal herbs. The Orchid House here consists of more than hundred hybrid varieties and the plant house contains many different kinds of beautiful and rare local and foreign plants such as Dieffenbachia, Begonia, Anthuriums, Alocasia, Dracaena and many others. The 750 metre long central drive of the gardens which is beautifully surrounded by the majestic "Soyal Palm" trees, meets a sub-drive which runs into more than 200 metres in length. The meeting point is the well designed pond with a splendid fountain -the Gardens' special pride. This driveway is surrounded by two main borders of phyllanthus and various other hedges of fine foliage and colourful flowers. The Arborature has a vast collection of trees (more than 1500 individual specimens) endemic and exotic trees grouped according to families. And there are a hundred square meters of remarkable fernery too. The two thick jungle patches that mark the entrance to the Gardens are wonderfully inviting. Their large trees providing shade, a cool breeze and of course a glorious sensation of stepping to a tropical wilderness to nature. Step in and discover the beauty within. Gampaha is 32 km. from the Colombo city on the Kandy road. It is within easy reach of the Gampaha Railway Station. "The Heneratgoda Gardens" is not more than 500 yards away from the Gampaha Minuwangoda road, just 18 miles away from Colombo.



*Riti-gaha-the giant Antians Innoxia at the Gampaha Gardens. Photo - Fred R. Malvenna*



*Part of the first Para-Rubber tree planted in Sri Lanka seen at the Gampaha Gardens. Photo - Fred R. Malvenna*