

# Royal Botanical Gardens at Peradeniya

Posted on

Mil Sansoni



The Gardens have been romanticised by legend and fantasy as a queen's pleasure garden and, more factually perhaps, as a king's spice garden.

History tells us that there was a garden there when King Wickrama Bahu ascended the throne and held court at Peradeniya in the 14th century. We also learn there was a park and royal residence at this site during King Kirthi Sri Rajasingha's reign (1747-82). Iliere is, indeed, an ambience about the Peradeniya Gardens that conjures up diaphanous images from the storied past. You may well hear soft footfalls in the fallen leaves and whispers in the trees, where queens and their handmaidens strolled and played and laughed and sighed.

But, just six years after the fall of the Kandyan Kingdom, the Royal Botanical Gardens, as it is today, was conceived by the British, genetically influenced, no doubt, by the world famous gardens at Kew. Alexander Moon was its first director – a Britisher who had arrived in the island four years earlier. In 1824, three years after the Botanical Gardens were established, he published his catalogue, “The Indigenous and Exotic Plants Growing in Ceylon”. The entrance to the Gardens is impressive. A grove of towering “*Amherstia nobilis*” greets you. The oldest specimens of this – “queen of the flowering trees”, planted in 1860, have since reached heights of over 80 feet. Visit the Gardens in the flowering season between November and April and you will see them in full bloom with sprays of vermillion and yellow blossoms.

Indeed, your first impression of the Gardens will be one of soaring trees, some of them festooned with rambling creepers – a riot of tendrils, shoots and flowers. Flanking the gateway are two magnificent specimens of the Flame of the Forest (*Butea frondosa*) introduced from Madagascar in 1841. In the dry season, they proudly display their profusion of flowers in shades of scarlet orange and crimson.

But walk on – this is a place for strolling and stopping and seeing. A place of secret arbours and arching pergolas of tailored lawns and banks of cannas, helianthus, chrysanthemums, and caladiums, of fragrant herbs and fernery.

Stop awhile by the Mahaweli River, where giant bamboos rattle their fronds and a swaying suspension bridge spans the river its gorge deep and rock strewn in drought and barely able to contain the torrent in spate.

If your time is limited, the roads in the Gardens are motorable. But move as slowly as you can or you will miss most of the pleasure that is the Gardens.

Having absorbed the general atmosphere you will not be ready for more specific viewing. The Orchid House shows examples of exotic flora that defy description. A creeper of Cinderella slipper (*Thumbergia*) adorns the entrance to a mini-world of fantastic shapes and brilliant colours. There are many who regard orchids as cold, sometimes frigid, in their scentless beauty. But who cannot be impressed by their well-bred poise and sophistication.

One treads softly when one enters this aristocratic domain of the dendrobium, cattleya, phalaenopsis, oncidium, aerides and more ubiquitous vanda.

You will certainly succumb to the charms of the Vesak Orchid (*Dendrobium maccarthiae*) which is indigenous to the humid, tropical forest areas of Sri Lanka. It blooms during the

month of Vesakm which commemorates the Buddha's Birth, Enlightenment and Attainment of Nibbhana. Occasionally white, this orchid is usually a fusion of violet and pink.

One can find over exposure to the Orchid House overpowering in its intensity of color and exotica. This is perhaps the time for a casual stroll through the landscaped lawns that are so much part of these beautiful gardens, set 1550 feet above sealevel in a climate that is ideal in its warmth and essential dampness - completely without extremes for the establishment and nurturing of tropical and sub tropical plants.

To the right of the river-drive are seven acres of verdant green, the Great Lawn, laid out about 1865. Here is also the Great Circle surrounded by memorial trees planted by distinguished visitors to commemorate their visits. In 1875 King Edward VII planted a Bo tree and the Czar of Russia, a Ceylon ironwood tree in 1891. King George V and Queen Mary, commemorated their visit to the island by planting a cannon ball tree. Munamal, an ornamental tree native to Sri Lanka was planted by the Duke of Windsor when he came here as Prince of Wales. In tribute to the peace that followed World War, the lovely Tabebuia Rosea was planted. Another great tree of historic significance is the tamarind, dedicated by the Rt Hon D S Senanayake, the country's first Prime Minister to the re-attainment of political independence.

Lord Louis Mountbatten, Supreme Commander, South East Asia Command during World War II, scouting around for a site for his headquarters in Kandy, found the Peradeniya Gardens irresistible. His love for things beautiful ensured their preservation for posterity.\

A connoisseur of Sri Lankan antique furniture will be interested in the sources of their timber-the figured lushness of calamander and nadun, the golden sheen of finished satinwood or the brooding darkness of carved ebony. All of these and teak, tamarind, mahogany, jak, halmilla, and ironwood are represented here in the Gardens.

In your wanderings through this salubrious place, you could not fail to observe the Avenue of Royal Palms. These are cabbage palm (*Oreodoxa oleraces*) much admired by visitors to the park and as frequently photographed. There are one hundred and eighty-five species of palm in the Peradeniya Gardens. Representing eighty genera. This is probably the most extensive collection of palm in the tropics. Dividing the useful from the purely decorative, one finds the ubiquitous coconut, which supplies nearly every requirement of the rural population: the basic essentials for thatched roofs and provision of food and drink, oil, fibre, timber, sweetmeats and alcohol for the country's traditional drink. The nut of the areca palm yields one of the basic ingredients for betelchewing, which is still indulged in by a large segment of the population. The flowering spathe of the kitul, when expertly tapped,

yields a sweet toddy - a most refreshing and health-giving drink. Among the purely decorative palms are the sealing wax palm, with its attractive red spathes, the royal Palm with its feathery fronds and the lordly talipot palm, the greatest of them all, which in forty to fifty years reaches its zenith of 80 to 90 feet. It ends its life in a collective flowering - sometimes 25 feet high. Apart from the palms, flowering trees and shrubs abound in Peradeniya. The Indian laburnum ( *Cassia fistula*) with its pendant yellow clusters, bougainvillea in all its entrancing shades, poinciana or golden mohur, frangipani - the temple flower, jacaranda and tabebuia are found in profusion, lining the avenues and in the Gardens. There is no limit to the floral extravaganza. But should you suddenly find the spectacle too lush and lavish, look for respite in the serene habitat of the giant water lily and the lotus, in their subdued colours, beloved of Buddhist devotees.

The Great Lawn - a verdant green bordered with shady trees. If you wish to learn more about the aromatic spices of Sri Lanka which changed the course of the island's history, take a stroll in the Spice Garden. Here the scent of fresh cinnamon mingles with that of cloves in what is the best-known arbour of spice in all Asia. Knowledgeable guides will tell you how the same tree with dark green leaves produces nutmeg and the much rarer mace, or let you discover the fresh tang of lemon grass in blades crushed between your fingers. Those interested in nature cures, herbal remedies and the traditional medicine of the East have a complete herbarium to spend even an entire day, amidst plants which provide most of the materia medica for the eastern healing science of Ayurveda. In its 168 years of existence, the Peradeniya Gardens have enjoyed the care, expertise and supervision of many curators and superintendents, both British and Sri Lankan. Some like Dr. G. H. K. Thwaites, who was made a Fellow of the Royal Society of England, have gained eminence through their work in and dedication to the science of horticulture. Others have contributed monumental works like Henry Trimen's "Flora of Ceylon" and H. F. Macmillan's book on tropical gardening.



An avenue of trees flanked by palm trees.



The Great Lawn - a verdant green bordered with shady trees.



Visitors to the Gardens admire the begonias inside a greenhouse.