

Community in Bloom

Singapore



GIVING CITIZEN GARDENERS ROOM TO GROW

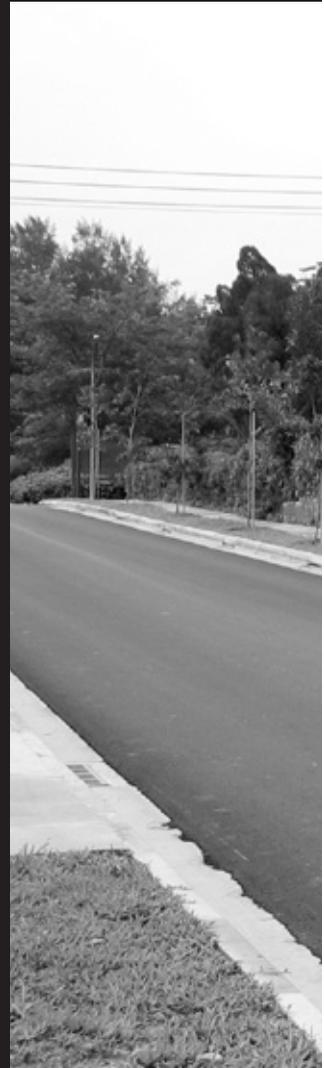
Singapore's Community in Bloom (CIB) programme is giving its residents living in a highly compact city the space to nurture green fingers. The National Parks Board (NParks), which changed its approach from a top-down to a more bottom-up one centred on people, is seeing the fruits of its labour in the form of improved connectedness between the government and the citizens, and a stronger sense of community.

The Challenge

As a result of Singapore's efforts from the 1960s, in planting trees and developing parks in the city, the city-state is known globally as a Garden City. In 2004, the Garden City Action Committee – set up to oversee policies and activities for greening the island – decided it was critical to include the people in the government's gardening efforts so that Singapore's greenery developments may be sustained. Historically, there had been a lack of citizen involvement in this area as the government had carried out the greening campaign in a mostly top-down manner. The Committee concluded that a strong partnership between the people and the private and public sectors was vital to sustaining Singapore's greenery developments and the creation of a gardening culture. This would not only help bolster the greening of the city, but also give a sense of ownership and belonging to the people.

⁰¹ Empty grass verges in Mayfair Park estate, before their Community in Bloom project.

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Around the same time as the Committee's recommendations, citizens had begun to express interest in getting involved in the greening process, but did not have a platform to do so. Residents of Mayfair Park Estate, for instance, took the initiative to approach NParks for tips on landscaping

their roadside verges. Although the residents had almost no knowledge of gardening, they were passionate about wanting to create their garden landscapes.

In response to these two catalysts, NParks began to create a system to implement communal gardens, a first involving the community.





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The Solution

Following the Mayfair Park Estate residents' request, NParks officers provided horticultural tips and befriended the residents in the process. The more consultative, less prescriptive approach was a paradigm shift in the method of engagement. This evolved into a community gardening initiative and gave birth to the Community In Bloom (CIB) programme a year later, set up to promote a gardening culture and a greater sense of civic ownership and participation.

NParks then sought to galvanise the support of partners from all walks of life – estate managers, mayors, teachers, grassroots activists, librarians and local gardening groups. Together with those who had already come on board, NParks established collaboration frameworks and guidelines to make it easier for groups to set up community gardens within their neighbourhoods, schools and workplaces. To provide knowledge and information on gardening to the community, talks were held in libraries in collaboration with the National Library Board.

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- 01 A Community In Bloom staff member helping a resident identify problems with her community garden plants.
- 02 Mayfair Park residents collaborating to turn their roadside verges into gardens.
- 03 A Community In Bloom volunteer demonstrating how to reuse plastic bottles as garden ornaments.

For communities wanting to start a CIB garden, NParks proposes a three-step approach: gather like-minded participants in the neighbourhood, school or organisation; approach the respective Residents’ Committee, Neighbourhood Committee or head of the school or organisation to secure support; and contact NParks to help determine a good gardening site and plan the garden layout, “download” basic gardening tips, and link up with other gardening groups.

Beyond offering these basic setting-up steps, NParks officers advised potential gardeners on how to sustain their gardens in the long run. They also guided gardeners to make proper plans for their gardens, such as raising funds, organising

activities to maintain interest and recruiting new gardeners. Officers also advised gardeners to include non-gardeners in the harvests and gardening activities so as to create a more cohesive community.

More importantly, NParks officers engaged the community by listening and connecting – with both gardeners and non-gardeners. Officers were first friends with members of the community, then government officers. They had to be positive despite obstacles and complaints, and be flexible in their dealings with the people.



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As the number of CIB gardens grew and the programme became more established, NParks worked with community gardeners to revitalise existing CIB gardens by improving residents' gardening skills through training. CIB Awards were also given out to recognise exemplary CIB gardens publicly and to further motivate the gardeners.

When the programme started out, sustaining residents' interest was challenging. However, the creation of the CIB Awards ignited a spirit of friendly competition among residents, resulting in an improved quantity and quality of gardens in the public housing estates. Through showcasing the flourishing gardens, potential gardeners also saw all that was possible in community gardening, discovered how skilful gardening was done, and recognised the benefits that could be reaped in community gardening. This peer-to-peer approach worked better than NParks telling or showing the gardeners what to do.

The Outcome

Since the launch of CIB in 2005, over 600 community gardens have been started in housing estates, schools, charities, factories and places of worship. Some 20,000 residents across all age, social and ethnic groups, have become gardeners. At a societal level, the gardens have fostered community bonding among the various groups.

The CIB programme has also grown a network of partners supporting a promising gardening culture. Hundreds of them have helped to spread the word as appointed CIB Ambassadors to mentor children from kindergartens and schools in gardening, and to help seed new gardens. Corporations, too, are contributing to the Garden City Fund to help start CIB gardens in orphanages, reformative homes and special needs institutions.





- 01 A Community In Bloom staff member promoting gardening to residents at a roadshow.
- 02 Teck Whye Primary School students gardening after school hours in their award-winning school garden.
- 03 Students of Regent Secondary School at work in their garden.

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The CIB programme has contributed to Singapore's civic society scene by marking a shift from a top-down, hierarchical approach to nurturing the Garden City, to one that is bottom-up and people-centred, allowing people to take responsibility over their own environment, projects and gardens. This worked towards improved connectedness between the government and the citizens. Such civic engagement, which would bring Singapore closer towards nation-building and nationhood, is what NParks had hoped for when the CIB programme was first implemented. Over the next few years, NParks hopes to nurture 1,000 CIB gardening groups with many more thousands of gardeners.

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In 2011, the government announced a plan to transform Singapore from a “Garden City” to a “City in a Garden” – one that is immersed in nature. This will entail a stronger focus on sustainability, conservation of biodiversity and community engagement. This means that the thousands of CIB gardeners, along with their friends, neighbours and co-workers, will help write the next chapter of Singapore’s greening campaign towards the City in a Garden vision.

01 Students and nearby residents working together on Jurong Primary School’s award-winning gardens.



Dr Leong Chee Chiew is Singapore’s Commissioner of Parks and Recreation, and concurrently the Deputy Chief Executive Officer (Professional Development and Services Cluster) of the National Parks Board. He chairs the Singapore Landscape Industry Council, the Heritage Trees Panel, the Workforce Safety and Health (Landscape) Sub-Committee, and co-chairs the inter-ministry Technical Committee on Coastal and Marine Environment. Dr Leong is a Board Member of Singapore Garden City Private Limited, and the Garden City Fund. He is also a member of the Centre for Liveable Cities Panel of Experts.