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Photos by **SAM THAM**

# Committed to green living

## Environmentalist Gurmit Singh and his wife opt for the simple life to preserve nature

**I**T IS the new year and what better way to kick-start the year than by adopting an environmentally-friendly lifestyle. While many people just set goals with no follow-up action, one couple stays committed to green living.

Gurmit Singh and his wife, Tan Siew Luang, are an admirable and inspirational couple who have embraced green living in all aspects of their lives.

Gurmit is a well-known environmentalist while Tan is an advocate of organic farming and the duo are founders of several non-governmental bodies and often embark on efforts to champion green initiatives in society.

"The day we got married, after we had registered, we went straight back to work. I took off for the farm while he went to his office," Tan said.

Their efforts to make the country more environmentally friendly have received positive encouragement from the Government and local councils.

Gurmit graduated with an engineering degree from Universiti Malaya and worked as an assistant engineer for five years before deciding that he did not want to be caught in the rat race for material wealth and wanted to dedicate his life towards human rights and environmental activism.

He sold his car, a Fiat 124 ST, in the 1980s and relied on public transportation, cycling and walking to reach his destinations.

"Besides the move to save the environment from the car's carbon emissions, I also felt it was less economical to own a car. It was difficult to park my car when I shifted from a landed house to a shop-house. My personal cost increased because I owned a car, so I sold it," Gurmit said.

Over the years, Gurmit has been recognised for his work to preserve the environment.

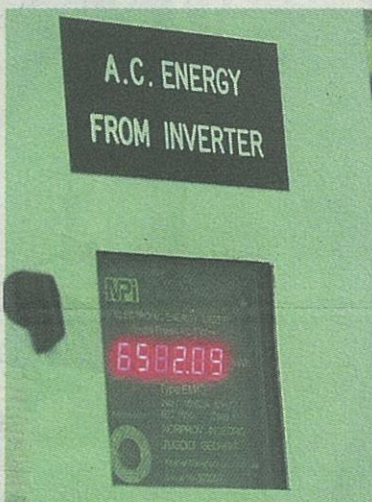
In 1993, he received the Langkawi Environmental Award while in 2001, he was conferred an honorary masters degree from Universiti Pertanian Malaysia, now known as Universiti Putra Malaysia. More recently, in 2008, he received the Sustainable Consumer award from the Domestic Trade and Consumer Affairs Ministry.

Tan has also been lauded for her efforts, such as in 2001, when she received the Saika award from the Japan Technological Institute Foundation under the International Federation of Organic Agricultural Movement Asia.

This award recognised her contributions to improve food quality and



**Inspirational couple:** Gurmit Singh (right) and Tan have embraced green living in all aspects of their lives.



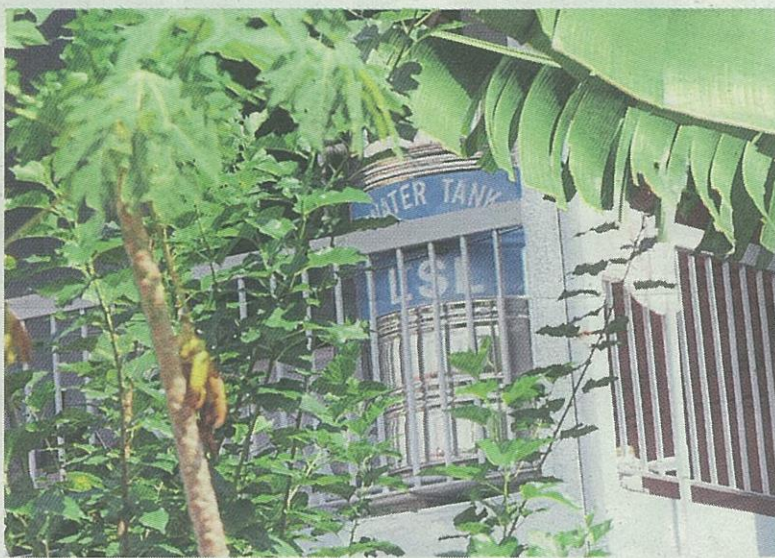
**Using energy wisely:** The meter read-out of a solar panel inverter.

environmental protection through the promotion of organic production systems in Asia.

Currently, Gurmit is the Centre For Environment, Technology and Development Malaysia (Cetdem) chairman and founding executive director.

Both of them acknowledged that their childhood upbringing had a great influence on their choices in life.

"My dad was a watchman and we were not well off. When I was young, my mother used to recycle cloth flour bags and sew it into bedsheets. From a very young age, we



**Reducing water wastage:** The couple's house is equipped with a rainwater harvesting system.

were taught not to waste," Gurmit said.

As for Tan, her family instilled the reading habit in her and that played a great role in shaping her mindset towards preserving the environment.

"When I picked up reading, I realised my responsibility towards nature. Also, when you do not have much, you learn to save," Tan said.

Their house in Petaling Jaya is

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— GURMIT SINGH

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**Recycle where possible:** Tan (right) at the Organic Farming Community Centre in Petaling Jaya. Recycling oil can be done at the centre.

## They call on public to take up gardening

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specially renovated in a sustainable manner to ensure cool indoor temperatures of between 28°C and 30°C. The house does not have air conditioners and solar panels help generate most of the electricity and hot water used.

The house is also equipped with a rainwater harvesting system, aluminium louvers to reduce direct sunlight and aerated hollow concrete to reduce heat.

"We use only three cubic meter of water on average each month," said Gurmit.

Besides that the couple carry out composting, recycle papers and separate their waste.

They strongly believe they do not need to "keep up with the Joneses", hence, it is easier for them to adopt a simple life.

Gurmit encourages people to shift the mindset to own only things they really need.

"Move away from greed to need," he said.

The duo refrain from dining out as much as possible and prefer to eat nutritious home-cooked meals.

Since Tan is active in organic farming, she often cooks the vegetables harvested from her garden. She encourages the public to

embark on gardening by planting easy-to-grow plants.

According to her, these plants include New Zealand spinach, spring onion, coriander, celery, ginger, Brazilian spinach, *cekur manis*, garlic, sweet potato and *pegaga*, all of which can be harvested for consumption.

Gurmit, meanwhile, said that those who felt they had to use air conditioners should limit the temperature to 24°C, as this could save up to 40% of energy consumption.

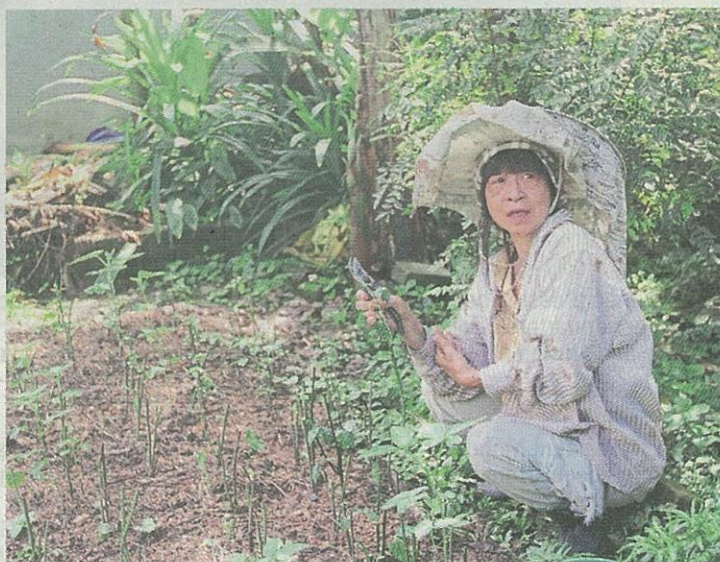
"A good refrigerator with energy-saving features will help too. Also allow at least 12cm of space between the refrigerator and the wall. Better air ventilation will ensure the fridge does not get overheated.

"Anything to be placed in the fridge should be cooled first as placing warm items in the fridge will lead to more energy consumption," he said.

The duo hope the public will do their share to help preserve the environment.

"People always tell us they admire us but they do not do anything on their part to save the environment.

"For a start, they could at least bring their own bags when they go shopping," Gurmit said.



**Happy gardener:** Tan at the Petaling Jaya Organic Farming Community Centre.



**Using natural resources:** Solar panels help generate most of the electricity and hot water used.



**To suit their needs:** The couple's house in Petaling Jaya is specially renovated in a sustainable manner to ensure cool indoor temperatures of between 28°C and 30°C.



**Keeping healthy:** Tan with some *cekur manis* leaves. She often cooks the vegetables harvested from her garden.



**Green shopper:** Gurmit says for a start, the public can start bringing their own bags when they go shopping. — filepic