

Your gardening questions answered by Dr Christopher Teh, soil biologist and senior lecturer at Universiti Putra Malaysia.



Dear Plant Doctor

Send your gardening questions to our expert by filling in the FAQs form at questions.eatsshootsandroots.com.

Q CAN you please tell me how to get rid of those tiny white pests that dwell on the underside of leaves? The whole leaf gets coated with them and then it withers and drops soon after. — Lac Kok Tham

A These white pests you are seeing are most likely aphids. They can be controlled by water-spraying them off your plants with a spray bottle or spraying them with water mixed with neem oil. You have to do this repeatedly until the aphid population is gone. You can also plant garlic or onion around your plants, as these two crops tend to control aphids.

Q I HAVE several chilli plants in pots and my first harvest was very good. However, with the second generation plants, the fruits are quite nice but do not ripen well. Just before ripening to a nice red colour they all start to turn slightly brownish with a fungus-like growth before rotting. Is it due to the soil or what is the problem? Is there any remedy? — TGC

A It is likely you may have over-watered your plants. Overwatering can cause fruit pods to fall, flowers to abort/drop, or no flowers. It can also cause fungal diseases. I suggest you discard all the soil from the pot and start again, this time watering less frequently than you did before.

Depending on where you place the pot, you will have to adjust the watering level. Generally, you should water once every two to three days. But you should only water when the soil is slightly damp, not when the soil is very wet. Consequently, the soil you use is also a factor that affects your watering frequency. Your soil should be freely draining. If it is not, you can add perlite or sand into your potted soil (mix them with the soil first).

If the leaves wilt, you are not watering enough. But do not rely on just touching the soil surface to see how much water there is in the pot. Very often, the soil surface may look very dry, but stick a finger into the soil, and you will feel that the soil underneath is still moist.

Q I WOULD like to know why my lime tree isn't fruiting despite putting manure and trimming it? — Vasanthi

A I suggest you do not add manure directly into the soil or on your plant, but compost the manure first. Besides killing any dangerous pathogens in the manure, composting makes the nutrients more readily available to your plant than applying it directly, without composting.

Lime trees require high N (nitrogen) and P (phosphorus), so I suggest applying fertilisers rich in those elements.

Lime trees also require little watering — once a week, rather than every day. Check the moisture of your soil to work out a good watering frequency. The soil should be only slightly damp for watering. If the leaves start to fall, it means you need to water more frequently.

Q HOW do I get rid of nematodes in my garden? My plants grow well initially but their leaves turn yellow and growth is stunted eventually. When I pull out the dying plant, I see rounded lumps on the roots. — Yun Chow

A One of the obvious signs of nematode infection is, indeed, knotted roots or distorted tubers.

To get rid of this infection, you need to till (turn over) your garden often to expose the nematodes. After tilling, cover the area with black plastic to heat up the soil underneath. Do this a couple of times until you see the nematode attacks stop.

If you are planting short term crops like vegetables, it is recommended that after every harvest, you remove the whole plant, including the roots.

Crop rotation (where you plant different crops throughout the year) is especially effective in controlling nematodes. Do not always plant the same crop.

Beans, tomatoes, and potatoes are generally resistant to nematodes.

Ready, set, grow!

By Eats, Shoots & Roots

Cooking fresh

This month's gardening column shares the green journey of a restaurateur who is determined to cook with the freshest ingredients possible.



Babe's rooftop space with its Grow Tong containers full of lush edible plants.

JEFF Ramsey is the chef and co-owner of a restaurant called Babe in Kuala Lumpur, which serves progressive modernist cuisine and is known for its Japanese-accented tapas (or "Japas" as Ramsey calls them).

The 41-year-old Japanese-American chef has worked with the who's who of haute cuisine globally, earning a Michelin star in 2009 when he was executive chef of Tapas Molecular Bar at the Mandarin Oriental Tokyo hotel.

In 2015, he and business partners set up Babe where, he says, "we're fortunate enough to have a space on the rooftop that's perfect for a garden".

Ramsey then worked with Eats, Shoots & Roots, the social enterprise that champions urban edible gardening, on setting up his herb and vegetable garden.

He and his restaurant crew play the part of gardeners, tending to their fresh greens six days a week.

Earlier this month, Babe emerged from a revamp with its interior as well as menu refreshed — and its green top growing as lushly as ever.

What inspired you to start this garden?
It's a chef's dream. Simply put, having a garden ensures that you have the freshest possible produce. So when you eat it, it's just pure natural goodness.

We ensure this by not using any artificial pesticides, herbicides or fertilisers. When it's that fresh and natural, of course the flavours are going to be pure. The quality of food can only be as good as the ingredients you start with.

What was the main objective of having a garden?

Initially we wanted to have a garden full of Japanese plants and vegetables that weren't available in Malaysia, to really have our menu stand out from any other restaurants in KL. While we are still experimenting with Japanese seeds, it has proven to be a long, arduous road to get there. The plants need a few generations to adapt to the climate and soil here, and a few more to really thrive.

In the mean time, we have been transplanting wild indigenous plants into our garden and cultivating them. Plants like lavender sorrel, a herb that has sour, tender leaves and beautiful aromatic flowers; ketumpang air (pepper elder), which grows well in shade and has such a unique soft perfume to it; and kai lan (Chinese kale), which if harvested when still tiny, has a pronounced mustardy bite to it. The advantages of growing these varieties are that they are well suited to grow in the climate here.

Tell us a little bit about your gardening experience.

Our purpose was to have the freshest living greens for our restaurant and we hadn't

anticipated too much else. But now, I strongly recommend every cook, professional or not, to tend to a garden. Because we've experienced so much more of a connection to food compared to before. You really learn to appreciate the effort it takes to grow food and take that feeling back into the kitchen. It has inspired us to create low-waste preparations or ways to use kitchen leftovers to create new recipes.

What were your challenges?

Gardening takes time, a lot of time! When we first started we had already decided to do all the tending to the garden ourselves, without the help of a full-time gardener. We weren't fully cognizant of the amount of time and energy required to run a successful garden.

It really helps that the entire kitchen has embraced working in the garden, and the results speak for themselves — the whole thing is really blossoming!

How often are you in the garden?

The team is up there six days a week at this point. They spend about 30 minutes up there tending, and a shorter time if they're just going up to harvest some leaves.

Why do you think growing your own food in the city is important?

I think this country is not focused enough on produce. We're focused on the dishes and food but not necessarily on the produce or source of the food, which people have truly embraced in other places. The whole "locavore" scene exploded around the world but I

don't think it's fully made its way to Malaysia. I think we've skipped over locavore and gone straight to the new trend, which is "Insta-genic" food.

I hear this from a lot of chefs — they can't get great produce and have to import it from Australia or Japan. It's the consumer demand. If the consumer demand is there, then it'll come. But, obviously, we have limitations here in terms of the ringgit being what it is and the whole culture of eating cheaply.

You can get cheap food really easily but, of course, it comes at a cost that you don't consider in terms of the carbon footprint and all that stuff. Hopefully, that will change and in a few years' time we can look back and say "remember back when we didn't have any local produce?"

I'd like to see more and more local produce, and urban gardening is a good way to kickstart it. Others can be inspired by all of this and try it themselves.

Any advice for anyone that's just getting started?

Have courage! When I first started having plants in my home, I killed so many of them. I was living in Japan and was seeing all these plants growing in the hallways of subways with no exposure to sunlight at all, and they were thriving! But every time I'd get a plant and put it on the window sill, it would just die.

Still, you have to have the courage — even in the face of all that adversity — to step up



(Above) Ramsey says working in the garden has increased his connection to food.



(Left) The space he had to work with, but 'the cost to build a garden on a rooftop is much higher', he says, so plant in containers on the ground if you can.

— Photos: Eats, Shoots & Roots

and try again. Eventually, you'll figure it out, and you'll be really happy with it.

Any other advice?

If you are not in a tall building like us, it doesn't have to be on a rooftop. There's a lot of logistics involved and the cost to build a garden on a rooftop is much higher. If you're on the ground, you can just put some compost in the ground, throw some soil in it, and just start with some cuttings of the plants that you'd like to grow — stick them in the soil, add water, and magic can happen. It's that easy to get started. Or just go to the nursery and start with potted plants.

Once you've started using these things in your cooking, it becomes addictive. You'll want more, and it'll just grow naturally. Or not. But just try it. I'm sure you'll have a lot of fun — and it's tasty!

Eats, Shoots & Roots is a social enterprise that champions urban edible gardening. For more information, go to eatsshootsandroots.com or [facebook.com/eatsshootsandroots](https://www.facebook.com/eatsshootsandroots) or e-mail hello@eatsshootsandroots.com.



Daun kadok, or wild pepper, grows well in semi-shaded areas; it's often eaten raw in dishes like Miang Kham.



Thai basil flowers are delicate in taste and their seeds can be added to drinks.



Surinam spinach or ginseng Jawa flowers.

How to propagate plants via CUTTINGS

- Ingredients:**
- > Sharp scissors or shears
 - > Container or pots with holes
 - > Water
 - > Good potting soil

Method:

1 Pick a strong stem with mature leaves; it should not be soft or "wobbly". Count five nodes up the stem, and then make a cut.



2 Snip off all of its leaves. This is to ensure the plant focuses on growing roots instead of trying to sustain leaves. Don't worry! The leaves will regrow from the nodes once roots have grown.

3 Planting, option A

Place the stem into a container with water; make sure the water covers at least two nodes on the stem. After one to two weeks, the cuttings will have rooted, and you can then transplant the stem into the ground or a pot with soil. Change the water daily to avoid it getting murky. Use this method for soft herbaceous cuttings like basil, mint, or sweet potato leaf.

Tip: You can place one to three cuttings together, just make sure to space them about two inches apart.

Green events

THE MAGIC OF NO-DIG GARDENING
JOIN A half-day practical introduction to home gardening and soil nutrition with compost coach, Harbir Gill.

This workshop is designed for anyone who is interested in getting started in growing fresh vegetables in their home/apartment or anyone who has already been bitten by the gardening bug but wants to see better results.

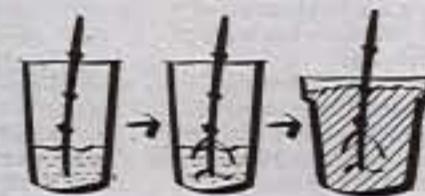
The course is hands-on and will introduce you to the basic principles of composting, making your own healthy soil, no dig gardening, and the benefits that come with it.

Date: Saturday, June 17
Time: 9.30am - 12.30pm
Location: Eats, Shoots & Roots HQ, Bukit Gasing, Petaling Jaya. (Full address disclosed upon registration)
Price: RM180 (RM165 if you mention The Star), inclusive of a pack of seeds and two bags of special potting mixes
Registration is required: E-mail workshops.eatsshootsandroots.com

SECRET FRIDAY BUKA PUASA @ EATS, SHOOTS & ROOTS
A RAMADAN dinner, community-style makan session featuring delicious food prepared by home cooks who are passionate about cooking with fresh ingredients from their gardens. The meal will be served family-style, following a garden tour.

Date: Friday, June 9
Time: 6.30pm - 8.30pm
Location: Eats, Shoots & Roots HQ, Bukit Gasing, Petaling Jaya. (Full address disclosed upon registration)
Price: Pay any amount you like
Registration is required as there is room for only 10 people: E-mail workshops.eatsshootsandroots.com

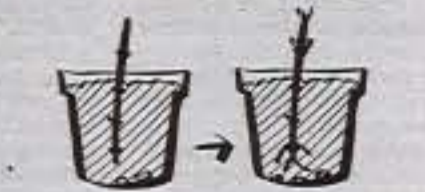
WATER



3 Planting, option B

Plant the stem in a hole in soil; make sure at least two nodes are covered by soil and that the bud above the node is facing up. Pat the soil around it to secure it upright. Keep well watered and it will start to root after one to two weeks. Use this method for hardwood cuttings like mulberry.

POTTING SOIL



4 The final result after one to two months should look like this.



Plants that are easy to propagate with cuttings: Daun kadok, daun kesum, holy basil, Indian borage, laksa leaf, mint, monnina, mulberry, sweet basil, sweet potato leaf, Thai basil, water spinach.



A view of the other end of the rooftop space; these are taro plants.



Ramsey (left) and Babe crew member Ryan Lau harvesting Surinam spinach flowers for the kitchen.