

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



## Dear Plant Doctor

Your gardening questions answered by Dr Teh, fill in the form at the website: [questions.eatsshootsandroots.com](http://questions.eatsshootsandroots.com).

**Q** WHAT is wrong with my coffee plant pictured above? – Haanim

**A** MOST likely the tree is being exposed to too much direct sunlight. Coffee trees prefer less direct sunlight and do well under shades. If possible move the tree so it is under the shade of larger trees or plant larger trees around the coffee tree.



**Q** I HAVE four seedless guava plants about three years old. They are growing well with abundant foliage. I fertilise the plants with chicken dung once every month. The plants produce many flowers but the flowers drop without forming any fruit. The tiny fruits that do get formed sometime also drop prematurely. Why do the flowers/small fruits drop? What can I do to get the plants to produce fruits? – Yoong T.C.

**A** FLOWER or fruit drops are commonly caused by over-watering or fertilising. Water just enough to keep the top soil moist (not soaking wet) and fertilise once only three or four times a year, not every month, as you are doing now. Stop fertilising completely until your tree recovers and produces fruits; then you can resume fertilising but ensure you do not overdo it.

**Q** I HAVE some pucuk manis (sweet leaf, *Sauropus androgynus*) plants in my garden. Lately, I noticed some leaves have random white patches on them or are whitish in the middle. Is there a problem with my plants? And are those leaves safe to eat? – Angie

**A** THE central white patch is normal for this plant, so you should not worry. They are expected! However, the random white patches probably indicate an infestation of insects called thrips. Just spray neem oil (1:100 oil to water) onto the leaves. Multiple sprayings might be required.

**Q** I AM growing soursop and noticed that, sometimes, yellow leaves appear. Why? What nutrients are lacking? Should fruiting happen within one and half to two years? There are plenty of flowers, but none have formed into fruits yet. What should I do? – Tan See Meng

**A** THE appearance of few yellow leaves is quite normal but if you notice many such leaves, they often indicate nutrient deficiency. Soursop has a high demand for nitrogen (N) and potassium (K); another component is phosphorus (P). So I suggest applying 1kg of NPK (in 10-10-10 parts) per tree, per year. Split the full application into four times per year so that you apply 250g NPK per tree, once every three months. Soursop also requires zinc (Zn) and boron (B) micronutrients. To make things simple, get a complete fertiliser that has NPK as well as these two micronutrients. You may need to do hand pollination to encourage more fruits to develop. Pollination is not difficult, and many videos on YouTube are available to show you how; search using the key word "sirsak" for Malay-language videos.

**Q** I HAVE been trying to grow chillies but always have issues with mealy bugs and aphids. I have tried spraying with water based aerosol, organic spray and soapy ones but just can't seem to control the infestations. What would you recommend? – Winston

**A** THE often recommended and fast way is to blast off the pests from the plant using a strong jet of water from your garden hose. You can also try spraying neem oil (about 30ml in 4 litres of water). Also, try planting chives, onions, or garlic next to your chilli plants, as the pests dislike these plants. And avoid over-fertilising your chilli plants, particularly with nitrogen.