

Citrus for New Year prosperity, luck and abundance

Citrus has a special place during Chinese New Year among the Chinese of Cantonese or Southern Chinese descent.

By Casey Ng

As soon as dawn breaks, practiced fingers flutter through the "golden jewels", artfully clipping, shaping and arranging the fruiting branches of thousands of potted plants. The fragrance in the air is unmistakably *Citrus*. Welcome to Chui Chak village in Perak, Malaysia, where Chinese New Year, also known as the Lunar New Year or Spring Festival, is taken extra-seriously, and timing is everything.

The Chinese in Malaysia and Singapore observe New Year traditions with a strong Cantonese or Southern Chinese flavour, centred on the themes of prosperity, luck and abundance. There is intense demand for food and ornaments that symbolize these themes.

The mandarin orange (*Citrus reticulata*) called *gam* in Cantonese, shares the same pronunciation in Cantonese as 'gold'. Mandarin oranges, imported from China, are exchanged as gifts of 'gold'.

The small-fruited *Citrus microcarpa*, known as *limau kasturi* in Malay, calamondin or musk lime in English, *calamansi* in the Philippines and *gatzai* in Cantonese is equally important.



Gat means 'auspicious' and *zai* is small or petite, referring to the size of the fruit. In Malaysia and Singapore, as in Guangdong and Hong Kong, a potted *gatzai*, heavily laden with fruit for Chinese New Year is as important as a Christmas tree for Christmas. A large potted plant carries hundreds of fruits, and expert growers have learnt how to time the ripening to coincide with Chinese New



Gatzai in a retail outlet

Year. This is no mean feat, because Chinese New Year is a moving target. It fell on 19 February in 2015, 31 January in 2014 and 10 February in 2013.

Very few horticulture endeavours can match the complexity of producing potted *gatzai* for Chinese New Year. What are the intricacies? For ten months, I have been talking to growers in a little-known sleepy hollow by the name Chui Chak in an attempt to tease out the secrets behind the scenes.

True enough the business of *gatzai* is all about meeting tight deadlines. "I have to worry for 14 months, from plantlets to selling" a grower says. Along

every development stage, each pot has to be carefully monitored, fertilized and tended in response to unpredictable weather conditions

"This is precision agriculture", says a grower who operates a nursery producing 4,000 pots yearly.



and diseases. "And the fruits must ripen just in time for Chinese New Year." Overly dry or wet weather will slow the growth and even destroy an entire batch. These are some of the many challenges faced by growers.

Tucked in a quiet corner of Perak, Malaysia, along the corridor between Bidor and Teluk Intan, Chui Chak is widely acknowledged as the epicentre of potted *gatzai* production. From here, 11 nurseries collectively



Newly potted plantlets

dominate and supply the market in Malaysia and Singapore. Populated by roughly 700 households, most men are smallholder farmers of sorts. The countryside is a mosaic of *gatzai*, papayas, guavas and bananas, and large paddy fields. The other crops provide the core income for most households, while cultivating potted *gatzai* is the speciality of the few who have the experience and patience.

Upon arrival at the village, one would be welcomed by smiles from the locals and it would not take long before someone asks you how they can help you. Strangers are rare here. A new face would immediately arouse attention. The village centre is landmarked by a few coffee shops, where all farmers converge daily to feel the pulse of Chui Chak's agriculture system. Sharing information is a safeguard against potential issues such as pests or glut, the two greatest fears that are constantly playing on every grower's mind.

From plantlets to selling, the development of potted *gatzai* takes 14 months. Plantlets are produced by marcotting (air-layering) from high quality parent plants and nursed for four months to ensure adequate rooting before they are sold at RM3 each to growers. Growers complain that they would typically have to discard 10% of plantlets bought due to various defects. The remaining 90% would be transferred to pots

containing burnt earth (see following story in this issue) that is mixed with 10% coconut fibre dust. If tended correctly, plants typically would start to flower in 6–7 months. At this critical juncture, the weather becomes a key element in deciding how many fruits are successfully formed and retained on plants. Heavy rain could ruin the flowers and the plants would end up with lower fruit profusion and a reduced selling price.

Gatzai requires full sun for growth optimization, and water fed into the pots must be controlled. In Malaysia's tropical wet climate the grower has to make decisions on a daily basis whether the plants have to be watered or not. Too much watering will reduce flowering and encourage fungal and other diseases to set in.

Priming for show time

30-40 days before the Chinese New Year, pots will be cleaned and fully grown *gatzai* will be



A view of the farm

pruned and dressed to showcase their golden gems. The fruiting twigs are tied to bamboo sticks for support. Prepared potted *gatzai* are sold and transported to wholesale customers in towns and cities by 24-footer trucks that pack 350 pots payload per trip.

At time of this writing, growers charge RM15-



Watering is manually controlled

18 for “number 3 size” (plant two feet tall) and up to RM500-2000 for “number 1 size” (plant five to six feet tall).

Growers and truck drivers are on their toes distributing potted *gatzai* until cut-off date, which is 10 days before the first day of the Chinese New Year. From experiences related by growers, buyers in central and northern Peninsular Malaysia prefer pots with some green *gatzai* fruits

because they are perceived to last longer, while in Johor Bahru and Singapore, buyers insist on pots with fully ripe golden fruits.

When asked, “Who are your largest customers?” growers were coy. They prefer not to sell to high-volume buyers. Many related horror stories on how they have been burnt by large deals. The

gatzai business in Chui Chak is transacted on traditional “handshake trust”. While new buyers are requested to pay 100% upfront, buyers with long term relations are requested to pay 20% deposit and the balance can be paid after Chinese New Year. “Unless they come with 100% upfront payment, I usually limit each customer to 100-200 pots to spread my risk”, one grower revealed”. Chui Chak shares the same distribution network as vegetable and



Almost ready for Chinese New Year

flower growers in Cameron Highlands nearby. It is a complex but highly efficient network built on trust and interdependence.

Growers claim *gatzai* fruit clusters can last for 2-3 months on the plants after Chinese New Year as long as they are watered and placed in sunny spots. Fruit life also depends on whether fruit flies are present in the vicinity. The plant is a host plant for some butterfly and insect species, and the fruits are susceptible to fruit fly attacks. Female fruit flies make oviposition punctures, and lay eggs inside the fruits. Hatched larvae burrow towards the fruit centre and the subsequent internal rot quickly turns the fruit soft and brown before it falls off. On the fruit, a sting mark can be identified as a small discoloured spot. One grower blamed mangoes that are popularly cultivated in housing estates

as the chief culprit for sustaining the fruit fly population in urbanized areas.

It is hard not to be moved by Chui Chak's raw beauty. At the end of the day, the glowing sun bids goodbye with a dazzling twilight display. From far, greenery turns crimson and the evening breeze offers respite to farmers who are winding down.

For someone who has traversed in and out of the village in the past 10 months in pursuit of the *gatzai* story, the scene also makes another impression: those heading home from the farms are not young anymore. Chui Chak has a shrinking youth population. "Oh, my sons are not interested", quips a grower cajoled into light conversation at the local coffee shop. He has given up trying to persuade them.

Sustained by favourable environment, land availability and the camaraderie of resourceful growers, Chui Chak has carved a niche as *gatzai* champion in the past 30 years. It has the expertise and framework to expand into export to other countries wherever Chinese New Year is celebrated the Cantonese way. There really is "gold" in *gatzai* for the next generation to realize.

Bibliography

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