



Orchids grow in Thailand like dandelions grow in North America, making Thailand a major exporter.

Thailand

gives gardeners
a reason to smile

BY MICHAEL PASCOE

Thailand, as the tourist posters proclaimed in the late 1980s, is the land of smiles, and this still holds true today. A visit to the country in February of 2011 was a homecoming; I once lived here and worked for the Royal Thai Government for three years. Now I was back again, visiting friends as a tourist. It still is the land of smiles, and a country where our version of 'take it easy' is translated into 'never mind' when things go awry. Thailand is, and always has been, a popular tourist Mecca because of this laid-back attitude and friendly people. Today however, it is also a booming central economy for the region because business here is easy. On a downtown Bangkok street you can hear German, French, English, Italian and Japanese spoken as frequently as Thai; the locals expect foreigners to act, well, foreign. Everyone is accepted and of course, everything must be 'sonook' or fun.

Thailand, once known as Siam, has always been a stable anchor in an area of constant disruption and conflict. Bordered by Myanmar (Burma) to the west, China to the north and Laos to the east, it is a country whose people have learned to tread lightly and always smile in the face of adversity. Thailand has the longest-serving world leader in its monarch, King Rama IX, and is a constitutional democracy. It is a country that has never been occupied by foreign interests. Though stable, it erupts with minor internal political power shifts, usually quelled by its benevolent leader-king.

Thailand's stable political history, coupled with its people's positive attitude, has enabled the country, based in a poor region of the world, to develop rapidly. Today, it is a newly-industrialized country and has one of the most progressive attitudes towards foreign investment and



Vivid colours reflect the happy nature of the Thai people.

culture. It is the 'mai pen rai' or 'never mind' attitude, where everything has to be sonook, that makes the people so accepting.

ROOTED IN TRADITION

Agriculture coupled with tourism are the pillars of the economy. (There is no word in the Thai language for horticulture.) Thailand is the world's largest rice exporter, farming 25 per cent of its arable land, the most of any country in the Mekong

Delta. This agrarian-based society has a strong connection with the land through centuries of farming, but also through its religion, Buddhism. Over 85 per cent of the population are practicing Buddhists. Thai people have an intense link with plants through their own gardens and religion; gaily decorated spirit houses are found in almost every garden and at the entrance to most industrial parks and factories. Spirit houses are often placed in a tropical oasis



Brightly decorated spirit houses are found at entrance ways and in gardens.

and adorned with offerings of fruit, jasmine and orchid flowers, and of course the staple, rice.

Horticulture in Thailand is everywhere; in this tropical climate everything grows. In the 1980s when I worked in Thailand, I was amazed at how easily woody cuttings rooted. At the time we were producing over one million *Morus alba* trees for the country's sericulture industry. We rooted hardwood stem cuttings over 12 cm in diameter; we



*Gardens in Thailand
are neat and trimmed.*

*Thailand is an
agrarian-based society,
with centuries of farming.*



could essentially root firewood. This was done without the use of hormones, mist systems and specialized rooting mixes. A simple plastic bag and a mix of burnt rice husks and sand sufficed to produce a rooting success rate exceeding 90 per cent.

It is the climate and the people's connection

with horticulture that has enabled Thailand to become one of the world's major exporters of cut orchid flowers. It is a place where *Dendrobiums* are as common as dandelions, with most homes having at least one orchid, grown in a coconut husk tied to the trunk of a banyan tree. (Buddha sat under a banyan



The Thai love for colour is reflected in all that surround their daily lives.



Masses of coloured annuals found in gardens symbolize prosperity.

tree) Thais, like the Laotians (see article on page 24 in the November/December issue of *Landscape Trades*), have been gardening in containers for centuries, and most garden centres support this culture by producing all of their inventory in heavy, decorative clay pots which act as instant adornment to a sometimes dry, dusty landscape.

Thais love colour, reflected in their temples, and silk and cotton fabrics, but

also in their gardens — where masses of brightly coloured annuals are often a sign of prosperity and welcome. Annual plantings are frequently combined with shrubs which often include *Ixora* hedges (a substitute for *Buxus*), resulting in a very static, controlled display. The Thai people are very easygoing, however when it comes to gardens, the landscape is often very controlled, with most elements clipped or pruned.

PLANTS ARE PERSONAL

Professional landscaping in Thailand is very limited; most homeowners design and plant their own gardens. While the affluent might hire someone to do it, they will almost always have direct input with regard to plant choice and placement. Labour is quite cheap and a gardener who would maintain the landscape would make about ten dollars a day, so even the middle class can have someone come in and do the heavy work of mowing or removing the spent fronds from palms.

Every home in Thailand has plants in pots and herbs in the garden. Fruit trees are common, and it is a tradition that plants are given freely from home to home as a sign of benevolence and graciousness. When I left the country all those years ago I gave away with great ceremony several *Ficus* and guava trees that I had air layered. They were accepted by my friends with both hands, palms facing up, as this is the Buddhist way to accept a honoured gift. When I visited those friends this past February it was with great ceremony that we ate a meal in their shade; a tree that family members, who were not yet born those many years ago, know was grown and given to their parents by the 'soon farang nakasaaid,' the tall, foreign agriculturist. **LT**

Michael Pascoe is the tall professor and academic program co-ordinator for the Horticulture Technician and Apprenticeship Horticulture Programs at Fanshawe College in London Ont., and director of The Gardens of Fanshawe College and the A.M. Cuddy Garden.