

Lau finds happiness in flowers



MANUAL POLLINATION: Lau showing how he cross-pollinates cannas using a paintbrush.

BY CHRISTINA KOH

CAMERON HIGHLANDS: In the "flower power" era of the 60s, he spent 10 years in the United States leading a bohemian lifestyle befitting the hippies of that generation.

He flitted from one part-time job to another and one college to another, pursuing studies spanning political science, philosophy, hotel management, music appreciation and horticulture.

"I'm intellectually greedy," said Lau Kuan, now 62, and pursuing a "flower power" lifestyle of a different kind - growing colourful cannas.

He is the owner of some of the most picturesque farms in

Tringkap here with more than 100 varieties of cannas lining his plots of chives.

"I don't want to miss out on anything so I end up doing a lot of things simultaneously, like what I'm doing in my farm," said Lau, who eventually graduated with a degree in ornamental crop production in 1967.

His first job was as a laboratory worker in an orchid tissue culture lab in California, but he still keeps up his childhood hobby of researching solar greenhouses and breeding plants.

He hopes to produce a blue canna and other canna varieties for commercial sale.

He developed a love for the flower after he spotted a wild



LUSH GREENERY: Lau checking on some of the plants at his farm in Cameron Highlands.

canna blooming by the roadside three years ago.

Treating his farm as his "living laboratory," Lau, like a bee, cross-pollinates the flowers by gathering the pollen with a paintbrush and transferring them to another flower.

And the results are stunning, to say the least.

His flowers sport a riot of colours, from yellow and orange blooms speckled with red stripes or pink spots, to can-

nas resembling orchids with dark yellow petals and maroon hearts.

Since inheriting the 2ha land from his father 15 years ago, Lau has been known to organically grow miniature roses smaller than a fingernail, day lilies, and his latest passion, the beds of cannas decorating his property.

"One of the amazing things about cannas is that it flowers in just six months or less, and

once pollinated, its seeds are ready to be planted in another two months," he said.

His ambition is to sell the seedlings of his multi-hued canna varieties to be showcased at the Beijing Olympics in 2008.

However, he is not sure how to go about it.

He has so far spoken to a few people but hoped that Fama would help him with the venture.

"Whether the cannas make it to the Olympics or not, I plan to market my seeds globally online sometime in the future."

"I am also aiming to release my miniature roses for commercial sale in a year's time," said Lau.

Acknowledging that being an organic farmer does not really reap huge profits, he said:

"I cannot even afford to buy a used car for my family, but I've never been happier."

Farmer rejects pesticide use in growing chives

CAMERON HIGHLANDS: His crop may not be certified as organic but this has not stopped Lau Kuan from producing pesticide-free chives for the past seven years.

He refuses to use pesticides although he can earn two times more if he did.

Lau, a science graduate from the Pierce College Agriculture Educational Centre in California, said recently:

"I cannot stand the smell of chemicals and I dislike the idea of killing living things.

"When you're into organic farming, it makes sense to look for plants and vegetables that do not need pesticides."

Lau, 62, fertilises his vegetables twice a week with mountain water mixed with 15kg of compost organic fertiliser and 500gm of urea in a 2,730-litre water tank.

He lets his chives grow for six weeks before chopping off the top half of the leaves to be used as mulch and fertiliser.

He then covers the remaining chives with a thick nylon netting for 10 days in a process known as blanching before harvesting them.

Limiting sunlight made the chives more tender and delicious as they contained less fibre, Lau said.

He harvests about 25kg of



BLANCHING METHOD: Lau covering the chives after six weeks with a thick nylon netting at his farm in Cameron Highlands recently.

the crop daily to sell to vegetable wholesalers in Ipoh and Kuala Lumpur for about RM10 per kilo.

Despite positive feedback from customers, Lau said he wondered if the Federal Agriculture Marketing Authority

would recognise his efforts.

He said there was a need for more farmers to adopt organic farming, particularly greenhouse-style farming.

He urged the Government to set aside at least 100ha of land, preferably away from conven-

tional farms that used pesticide, for organic farming.

"Even if Malaysia doesn't have the technology, we should acquire it from overseas and educate the local farmers on the ways that it could be done.

"The world is finite and we



FREE FROM THREAT: A snail left alone on a leaf at Lau's farm in Cameron Highlands recently.

need to think of better and environmentally-friendly ways of agriculture," Lau said.

"The idea is to produce better quality and higher quantity produce within the same area," he said, adding that biotechnology could be the answer.

For many farmers, organic farming may not seem profitable but Lau thinks it can be.

"If you do it right and grow the crops pesticide-free, I think consumers would not mind paying more for the good quality produce," he added.