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Roads now safe havens for trees

NParks' Heritage Roads scheme will set new rules for land developers

By Tan Hui Yee

A FEW metres after turning into Mount Pleasant Road from its Whitley Road end, the motorist plunges into a green tunnel.



TUNNEL OF TREES: Mandai Road, home to trees such as the Jambu Laut and Common Mahang, will be one of five roads protected by NParks' new Heritage Roads scheme. -- SEAN TAN

Trees and bushes rise up on either side of the winding two-lane route, almost meeting overhead, and the sun filters fitfully through the branches of trees such as the Tembusu, Saga and Yellow Flame. So dense is the greenery on either side, passers-by can hardly make out the houses beyond.

A sense of serenity hovers over the road despite the unending singing of insects, until the Singapore Polo Club and the Police Academy come into view at its other end, where it joins Thomson Road.

To preserve the charm of the 1.8km drive, and maintain Singapore's garden-like ambience, the road will be protected under the Heritage Roads scheme, expected to become law in May.

It is one of five to be preserved under the programme. The others, which exude a similar atmosphere, are South Buona Vista, Mandai, Lim Chu Kang and Arcadia roads. They were picked from a list of 55 drawn up by the National Parks Board in 2001.

Although trees along these roads cannot be cut down, NParks does not currently have the legal power to stop bushes, other plants and grass on the verge beside the road from being destroyed. But this will change with the law for the five gazetted Heritage Roads.

The law will also allow NParks to maintain the roads' verges - which can be up to 10m wide - even if they are part of private developments, and require developers of what is now state land along these roads to provide a green buffer. However, the new law does not require present owners of private land along these roads to preserve these verges.

Meanwhile, the remaining 50 roads from the earlier list, which

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include Upper Thomson Road and Loyang Avenue, will be put on a watchlist. NParks will monitor any developments that may threaten their environment, and may make them Heritage Roads in the future.

The Heritage Roads scheme is just one part of the country's tree conservation plan.

Another scheme, called the Heritage Tree programme, makes developers consider other options besides cutting, in the case of 36 historically or culturally significant trees.

One such tree is a Tembusu in the Botanic Gardens, which is featured on the back of the \$5 note.

The maximum fine for felling a tree with a girth of more than 1m in specified areas without permission will also be increased in May to \$50,000. It is now \$10,000. It may also come with a six-month jail sentence.

A total of 28 trees were felled without the necessary nod in 2003. The figure for last year is not available. Offenders have been fined up to \$8,000 so far.

Sometimes, government agencies themselves remove trees in a conservation area, such as the 200 or so that were felled last year to make way for a future Circle Line MRT station off Thomson Road.

The decision raised the ire of the Nature Society, as the area is an important feeding ground for some rare birds.

However, despite the tougher new rules, NParks admitted to The Straits Times that in the face of increasing urbanisation, protecting old trees is 'becoming increasingly difficult'.

Trees along the Heritage Roads

ARCADIA ROAD

Rain Tree (right)

Introduced into Singapore in 1876. The timber from this fast-growing tree is resistant to fungus and termites.

Wild Cinnamon

A fast-growing evergreen. The oil from its leaves can be used to perfume a place. Its roots, when boiled, are commonly given to women after childbirth, or used to treat rheumatism and fever.

African Tulip

Introduced to Singapore from Africa in the 1910s, it has red tulip-like flowers. The tree blooms year round and flowers last about three days.

Angsana (right)

A native of Malaysia, the Philippines, Borneo, Myanmar and New Guinea. The wood has a rose-like scent and is said to be the best fine-furniture wood in Malaysia. Parts of the tree are used in native medicine.

MANDAI ROAD

Jambu Laut

A native coastal tree that can grow to 30m. Its flowers are white and arranged in compact clusters and its fruit is edible but quite dry.

Common Mahang

This can reach 15m, and has an uneven, shabby crown. Its twigs and leaves are hairy. Its young leaves are often reddish-purple on one side.

MOUNT PLEASANT ROAD

Yellow Flame

Lovebirds flock to Valentine's ads

His haircuts cost just \$5

Worst inferno

Three S'poreans picked for young global leaders' forum

'Tiny' invention could mean big cut in drug costs

Vaccine alone won't do

Robbed at their void deck 'home'

Resident in scrap with condo guard



Tree This tree is common throughout South-east Asia and Australia. It can grow 15m to 20m high. It has an umbrella-shaped crown and bright yellow flowers.

Tembusu Native (right)

to Singapore and Peninsular Malaysia. Its wood is heavy and hard, and is often used in Singapore to make chopping boards.



SOUTH BUONA VISTA ROAD

Tiup-Tiup

An upright evergreen that reaches 8m. Its flowers look like white bells. In the middle of the forest, it tends to look like a long pole with foliage only at the top.

Simpoh Air

A small tree with deep roots that grows on eroded soil, wasteland, forest edge and swampy areas. Its large leaves are sometimes used to wrap food.

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