

## MALAYSIA VISIT - JULY 2012

Earlier this year I was invited back to Malaysia to run another seminar. The topic for the seminar was The Practical Application of the Australian Demeter Biodynamic Method. This report follows on from another visit last year and will not repeat the details of last year's trip. To make the situation clear, I wish to say that I do these trips as an independent representative of the Australian Demeter Biodynamic Method (with the support of Alex) and these trips are not organised, funded by, nor have any other links to the BDGAI.

I arrived in Kuala Lumpur on Thursday 19<sup>th</sup> July and was met by Tien Khuan, the first BD market gardener in Malaysia, based in the in the Cameron Highlands. The seminar was again to be held at his 10 acre farm, with 6 acres of BD vegetables and beautiful earth buildings. Tien and his wife Woon Sing hosted and organised both trips and have done much to promote Australian Demeter BD in Malaysia.

Tien was there with Jakob Meiser, who was joining us again this year (Jakob made the initial connection between Tien and me about three years ago), Tar Fong, a farmer, and Weihe Hu (secretary of Demeter China) from China and Rawimas from Thailand. There were also 13 other farmers from China that were travelling with us as well as KS Tan, a farmer that started BD after last year and helped organise the visiting Chinese farmers. KS has also helped very much with the promotion of our method in Malaysia and China. He has (with the help of Tien and Woon Sing) translated my DVD into Traditional Chinese and Mandarin, as well as translating the BDAAA practical notes.

We hit the ground running and went straight to the farm of Mr Ho in the Genting Highlands, the father in law of Tien and the first organic farmer in Malaysia, soon to be Biodynamic. (I wrote in some detail last year about the farms of Tien, KS, Mr Ho and Billy Chea and that can be read in a previous report). Also I should remind people that 90% of the vegetables are grown under a greenhouse roof with open sides, due to there being too much rain. And there is an abundance of cheap labour with most farms having many workers.

We had lunch and then visited a new farm that Tien is starting in the Genting Highlands. Some land is cleared and flat while other areas need to be prepared. It will be quite different from his Cameron Highland farm (6 acres by hand and lots of workers). He has purchased a rehabilitator plough, bed former, seeder, transplanter, mulcher etc to become more efficient. He will prepare the new farm with green manures and prepared 500.

We then visited Green Wish Farm, owned by Kenny Ng and his wife. It is an organic farm that produces fruit and vegetables to sell locally. It is run by Kenny's brother, sister-in-law and son and focuses mainly on a vast array of unusual fruits. They gave us a great meal and we headed to Kampung Raja, our base in the Cameron Highlands.

Next day we went to Tien's farm, called Terra Farm, to show the Chinese farmers around and to check all was prepared for the seminar. I met with two workers of Tien's that attended last year's seminar. Ya Sing is working on Terra Farm, the existing market garden and Yoa who is working on the 'Jungle Farm', a new farm started last year. We had a good discussion on some finer points of Biodynamic market gardening and they have progressed a lot in their knowledge now that they are undertaking the practical aspects of BD. After lunch we visited an organic farm, owned by a company that owns several farms. The company supplies the plants and the organic fertiliser and the grower follows a recipe. It was the worst example of an organic farm I have seen. Plants over fertilised and blue-green, pest attack, lack of light, and nothing at all is given back to the soil. I was glad to get out of there as it was painful to see.

That afternoon I caught up with Paul and Cynthia Daniel, biodynamic market gardeners on King Island. I have known them for some time and have helped Paul from time to time as the need arises. They are selling from a shop, basically next door to Coles, and supplying some produce direct to other locals. A very delicate balancing act with getting the supply and demand balance right. Cynthia is originally from Malaysia and they were over there visiting and I thought it would be beneficial for the seminar participants if Paul and Cynthia came along.

Saturday was the first day of the seminar and we started early with a breakfast for all participants at the farm. There were 30 farmers from Malaysia, 5 from Sabah (Borneo, East Malaysia), the 15 from China, and 4 from Taiwan and one from Thailand. Although a lot had reasonable English, everything had to be translated to Chinese (Mandarin).

The first day included the topics, history of Biodynamics, plant feeding within nature's law, humus, soil cultivation, soil structure and roots, humus formation and soil biology, Biodynamic plant expression, green manures and Biodynamic sheet composting, a DVD – Establishing Biodynamic Soil, using Preparation 500, Prepared 500, stirring, spraying and storing 500. The participants were all given hands on tuition in stirring 500 and 501 with assistance from Jakob and Paul.

This was all interspersed with photos of BD soils, plants, cultivation equipment etc, farm walks to see BD plant expression, root structure, soil structure and many questions of a practical nature.

On Sunday it was a very early start, the topics included, using Preparation 501, stirring, spraying and storing 501, building a Biodynamic compost heap and using preparations 502-507. As they have the man power and ideal conditions for composting about 4 or so hours was given to this topic and a large heap was made. Although for practical and results based reasons the BD farmers there are leaning more and more towards sheet composting and green manures. This section was run by Paul and Jakob and was run very well. I then got Jakob, and Paul and Cynthia to briefly discuss how they came to biodynamics and where

they are now. It was an especially interesting example that Paul gave for others on growing for and supplying a local market. I thank Jakob, Paul and Cynthia for their assistance. I then discussed using the Biodynamic Astrological sowing chart, the Demeter Certification process in Australia and the Demeter BD organizations in Australia. Again we finished with many questions and recapping of some major practical points and the day ended about 5pm. One participant from last year's seminar that started BD was Hoe Shuien, a fruit farmer from near Johor. Last year he gave us his bananas and papaya to sample and they were quite good. He said he could not make this seminar due to other commitments. He did however turn up about 4.30, he finished what he had been doing and drove for 5 hours so we could taste the fruit after a year of BD. He was that excited about his results and rightly so, it was the best banana (and I am a banana fan) and papaya that I have eaten. I was sorry that I could not make it to his farm but will do so next time.

Monday was a special session for the farmers that had come from China. It was for me to get to know them and what they are farming and for them to ask any questions that may have arisen. They were all instructed to bring photos of plants, soil and roots from their farms. They also provided details of climate etc as well. One of the Chinese there, Weihe, was the secretary of Demeter China. He was also growing some vegetables as well. Weihe admitted that Demeter China (Demeter International) had arranged many others to come to China to talk Biodynamic, all anthroposophically based and all with no result. He showed photos of the preps they had made and been using (very poor) and after seeing our preps he could see why they were not getting any results. He had already really seen this during the weekend from the photos of our plants and soil and from those on Tiens farm also. I am willing to help him but he will have some tough decisions to make regarding what path he will take. Three or four others that had dabbled in BD with no result were also keen to start our method as they were already aware of our results, told of by an Australian in a Waldorf school in China. I have found some very practical farmers, and some just beginning, to work with, which was the aim of this exercise. We have set many things in place and I will go next year if we have some results to speak to. Tien and KS will provide great assistance in this area. This session was meant to be for 3 hours but went for 6 hours instead. When we finished four of the farmers said that 'we have been to BD seminars in China and all we heard was Steiner, Anthroposophy and cosmos and we would get back to our farms with no idea what to do. Now we can make a start'. That was good enough for me.

I finished the day with a certification inspection for Demeter certification of Tiens farm.

Next day we visited the farm of Billy Chea to see how he was progressing after starting BD last year. His soil and plants have improved a lot. All the weed mat covers that were used outside were gone and he has introduced green manures into his rotation. Billy could still use more 501 though, although it is difficult on the plants that are not under cover, due to the amount of rain. He is happy with his results so far and will make more improvements.

After lunch we went to the 5 acre organic market garden of Mr Lee, a participant from the weekend's seminar. It was the best organic market garden that I saw in Malaysia. The plants were quite good, not too pushed, although the soil could use some work. He is utilizing all the space he has very efficiently, but is using some weed mat for some crop varieties. Lee had stood out at the seminar as being a good operator with a lot of practical knowledge and he picked up on, and understood, the practical biodynamic principles very quickly. The plants and soil he saw at Tiens farm had impressed him a lot and left him wanting to improve his farm. He rang a day after the visit to say that he wanted to convert his farm to BD and would take all steps necessary to do so.

Last year I mentioned that the light intensity in Malaysia was not strong and that a lot of 501 could be used. The good farmers there have seen the value of light and clean the covers of their greenhouse every 6 months to let in as much light as possible. Tien and Lee both do this and it is a good practical observation and simple solution to many problems. Many do not do this and as the covers get dirtier the plants struggle more and more.

We had a quick visit to the 'Jungle Farm' where Tien and Woon Sing are developing a terraced market garden. They have built 5 two room tree houses, with more to be built, as well as a central hall for gatherings. The indigenous Orang Asley has done all the building in traditional style and it is amazing to see. This farm is being developed as an eco-tourist farm stay but is still in the early stages.

We went back to pack, say goodbye to the Cameron Highlands and head to Georgetown, Penang.

Wednesday we spent in Penang where Tien took me to a Chinese tea house for a lesson in tea and to purchase a prized Chinese Purple Clay (Yixing) teapot. The tea house is called Loa Sher and the owner Wei Liang. I include this for interest because the whole process had some interesting parallels to Biodynamics. The purple clay is actually a rock that is ground to a powder. This powder is moistened and gently hammered to form a sheet that is then rolled into a solid tube. This tube is then stored for 5 years for the microbes to turn colloidal so that it acquires a stickiness to work with. Once made it is fired to 1100 degrees C and once fired it is the 'stability' of the light that the pot holds (when held to the light) that determines its quality. Real tea is also alive and it is the microbial activity that gives the tea different flavor as the tea matures. It should be stored basically as for 500. We sampled many teas with the oldest being about 60 years old and I was honored to have this experience. I purchased some teas to go with the purple clay teapot.

We headed to Kuala Lumpur for my flight and said our goodbyes. I look forward to seeing the progress all have made next year and seeing what develops in China, Taiwan and Borneo with the farmers I will be working with.

Darren Aitken

