

MALAYSIA, BORNEO VISIT 2014

I cannot repeat the history behind these visits and the people involved but they can be read about in previous BDGAI newsletters, BD Growing Magazine and at our website www.vortexvegies.com.au under the Education section.

On Thursday 4th April I was heading off to Malaysia to Visit Tien Khuan Ng and his wife Woon Sing. I was accompanied by Jakob Meiser and we were to see other farms as well. I only fly during the day now, I used to fly at night pretending I would get some sleep, but I have learnt that it is just no good starting a trip tired. By the time we got to Kampung Raja in the Cameron Highlands it was about 1.30 am anyway.

They have had some unusual prolonged dry spells here recently, even to the extent where some parts of Kuala Lumpur have been on water restrictions, they have never addressed the issue of large water storage capacity as it had never been needed.

Friday began by visiting Tien and Woon Sings new shop selling their Australian Demeter certified produce, juices, dry goods, clothing and bedding, both from organic cotton. They are moving to a new location in the village that will allow them to have a café/restaurant as well as the shop.

We went to Terra Farm for the inspection which went well. Tien has lifted the rain shelters high enough to get the tractor and rehabilitator in. A big job but well worth the effort. This good BD soil had not been cultivated to this depth before, and as careful as the cultivation was a little subsoil has been lifted to the top, but this is converting very well with roots and 500. They are very happy with the result and have seen a very positive effect in the growth, health and production of deep rooted crops like zucchini and tomato. Green manure is now a staple in the seasonal rotations, with compost added later to get another crop before green manuring again. Green manure seed varieties are very limited here. Tien's green manure has been mainly dun peas (they import them to grow pea shoots, so use it for green manure as well) and it really just needs something with stronger roots and more bulk. Woon Sing suggested rice which should work very well and considering where they are is a logical solution. They are looking to get other seed as well.

We had a look at a new section across the river that was being green manured and converted to BD from virgin soil. It will be interesting to see the development on this new, yellow clay piece of land. They are beginning to mechanise a little more now but still have the same workforce of foreign workers. The main guy, Tam Buk from Burma, has been with Tien for several years and has learnt a lot about BD.

Stayed at the farm for the night. Tien has built an amazing array of mainly rammed earth buildings of unique design and structure. Very peaceful and good for sleep.

Next morning we had a get together of some farmers from past seminars and some new ones from a seminar that Tien did late last year. Tien and Woon Sing have enough knowledge and are more than capable to introduce new farmers to Australian Demeter BD and they have the results to speak to. He has also translated many seminars and farm visits

for me in Malaysia and China. Each year, time permitting, Tien and I will follow up with new farmers who show the commitment to start practicing. Tien and Woon Sing will have to do more of this as time progresses, this is how it is to work in Malaysia now.

There were many questions of a practical nature and some recapping of the aspects of plant feeding, the use of green manure and the application of 500 and 501. Another stirring demonstration and a bit more hands on tuition and fine tuning was given to those there. We visited the farm of Andy, a young man who had taken over a two acre organic farm that he wants to convert to BD. It is unusual soil for the Cameron Highlands, coarse sand with a very fine white clay and a more yellow friable clay base. The only implement that had been used on the farm was a rotary hoe and there was some bad compaction. The first thing he had done was to green manure the whole area. He sees now that he needs to relieve that compaction and will do so with the rehabilitator where possible and use broad forks on the rest. They can control the moisture in the rain shelters and can dry the soil out so as to time the soil cultivation correctly, with some practice of course. Then he will green manure again, a relatively quick process here, before growing vegetables.

We then went to the organic farm of Chan Wai Meng where he grows 5 acres of garlic chives, on 5 separate terraced sections and wants to convert to BD. The garlic chives are grown for three years before being removed. At this stage the soil was cultivated, compost added and chives replanted. They were also dressed with organic fertiliser after harvesting. Wai Meng, with the new understanding of water soluble vs humus, now wants to green manure between plantings and side dress with BD compost after harvesting if needed. In six months he has already dropped the application of any fertiliser and cultivated between the rows of chives on 3 acres of the farm and has applied 500 twice. We were amazed at the result, the sprayed areas had soil that was structured, open and bubbling, with very good plant expression and colour, whereas the unsprayed section had soil that was a bit slimy on top and 'tight', you could describe the plants as the same. They were about to start on the so far unsprayed areas.

The harvesting process is interesting. After planting they allow the plant to grow for 6 months, they cut the chives green and they have quite a nice flavour, but these are discarded and placed on the ground. They then cover with a black mesh about a metre off the ground and get a yellowish white regrowth, reaching for the little light above, this is then harvested and bunched. The flavour and texture of this was amazing and well in demand. The cover is removed after two harvests and the plants grow through a green phase again. They rotate this harvesting regime around the farm supplying the market all year.

We went to spend the night at the other farm of Tien and Woon Sing, a bit higher up in the Highlands at Bring Chang, what we call the jungle farm. Here at night it can actually get a bit chilly and Tien is trying to make 500 here. He had tried last winter with a bit of advice and direction and did quite well considering, making reasonable 500. He came to Australia this year to learn preparation making from Alex and Frances, a man from Taiwan, Shui Yun and a lady from China, Ziqi, both farmers, did likewise. So we will see how it goes.

It is a totally different style of farming on this farm. There is minimum clearing and considered terracing to accommodate vegetables and fruit and all work is done by hand. A stark contrast to the clearing, levelling, and erosion, going on across the valley. There are also six amazing tree houses, with bathroom and toilet, for eco tourist visits. There is one main kitchen leading to the main hall built out into the trees and overlooking the farm.

Sunday morning we had a good long look at the farm. The soil presents different challenges here and is a forest mulch on top of friable yellow clay. There has been good soil development since the last visit two years ago, when a green manure crop was struggling to grow. The soil still has some way to go but some vegetables were growing very well, as had been indicated by the meal the night before, and others were still not there yet. I would think a bit more green manure and a year or two and it will be there. We headed to a village near George Town to spend the night.

Jakob and I stayed in Tien's sister's house and had a great Malay breakfast the next morning from a vendor that sets up right outside, a good way to start the day. We headed to KL for our flight to Borneo, to the town of Tawau on the coast of the Malaysian state of Sabah. Borneo is divided into three sections, there is the tiny Brunei, with the rest divided by Malaysia and Indonesia. We were going to visit Gan Hock Song and Mr Tan, farmers who Tien had introduced to our BD and who had visited me last August, with his family. He has palm oil, and is developing fruit and vegetable farms. Flight was delayed so we arrived there about 7.30pm and were met by Gan and his two sons, CK and Jason. We met up with some other farmers, one, Mr Liew owned a palm oil mill as well, and went for an amazing seafood meal, and a cold beer.

Tuesday morning we headed to the town of Sempdorna to visit Mr Tan, 79, and his son, palm oil farmers with 800 acres. His half of the farm is organic and his sons is still conventional. Mr Tan has stopped using any input a year ago on 10 acres and has sprayed 500 with very observable results in soil structure, pasture colour and uprightness and in tree colour and expression. He has had no drop in harvest as yet, and is keen to expand this 10 acres and develop a larger BD example. He is very keen to observe the change in fruit quality over time. He also uses cows to graze the pasture on a rotational basis. We can only supply limited quantities of prepared 500 to overseas farmers, as Australia must be catered for first. If I can supply more I will and hopefully Tien will be able to supply more 500 over time.

We were to go to for a meal to a village on the sea off the coast of Sempdorna but there had been an increase in kidnappings from there by Islamic extremists from the Southern Philippines, so our hosts decided against it. There were no complaints.

Wednesday morning we had a look at some Indian preparations that Gan had been using before switching to our 500, they were not the worst preps I had seen but the 500 was not of a colloidal quality and was too dry and the 502 – 507 were not converted. We went to see the farms of Mr Gan and started at the palm oil plantation, where other farmers had gathered as well. After harvest they have a lot of prunings and waste that gets placed in between the rows, they attempt to compost this but it is not a well made heap. They would

have to change the way they do this and we discussed the possibilities. I suggested to use a mulcher to mulch the material in situ, allowing the material to break down and allow pasture growth quicker. There is plenty of space between the trees for tractor and mulcher.

Some sites have been replanted, they pull out the trees at about 20 years old, and they live to 50 or more but become difficult to harvest. They are having major problems with the second generation trees, losing up to 20% of the planting with root and stem fungal problems. Some farms have even planted a third planting with even more disastrous results. Not good environmentally or economically. I discussed the concept of ripping the land after removing the trees, growing two green manures before putting it back to pasture and using the cattle to graze rotationally in conjunction with prepared 500 for three years (a guess, but a long time out of production so a good way to gauge a reaction), before replanting the trees. Surprisingly the farmers seemed willing to take on this process, realising that they must give something back to the soil by building the bank of humus, and then maintaining and building the fertility. They will have to work out the system and time frame that can do this.

Most of Gan's property is organic, converted from conventional a couple of years ago. This soil is compacted and lifeless with a slime on top still evident in some places from previous herbicide usage. It desperately needs compaction relief. Gan said that the trees could stand cultivation and they do get a dry season here. One 10 acre site of Gan's where some soil work had been done and had been sprayed with 500 twice, was producing very good results. The soil structure was developing and the pasture showed a green glow and uprightness, with the trees looking healthier in general.

We went up the mountain to a piece of land that Gan is using to grow different crops. In areas they have done some considered clearing and terracing and are growing durian (not in season this visit), pineapple, sugar and a lot of beautiful ginger. It is the best red virgin volcanic soil I have seen, quite new in an evolutionary sense, and should develop biologically very well. CK is also interested in growing some coffee as well, some coffee was grown in Malaysia but they are not sure how it will go regards the elevation requirements for coffee, so it will be interesting to see that development and that of the farm.

Next to the area that is to be for vegetables. This is a new project that Gan has started, with a very good young man, Hi, at the helm. We spent some time looking at the compost, made with the Indian preps and it was not great quality. We discussed the use of traditional composting vs sheet composting via green manure. When I explained you get much better results for your effort by green manuring Hi was delighted that so much time making large compost heaps that would only cover a small area was to be a thing of the past. The soil could do with green manure to build the humus but has very good potential and the corn that was growing looked a little pushed from the compost. Again it will be interesting to see how this develops.

Got to rest for an hour before having some more beautiful food cooked by Ivy, Mrs Gan, and heading off to give a talk to the Tawau Agricultural Association, at which 65 people were waiting to hear about the Australian Demeter Biodynamic method. After a brief introduction

on the BD development in Australia I spoke of the plant health, soil health, and the environmental and farming consequences of using water soluble fertilisers, I had only offended five people that left. I explained our BD system of using 500 and creating humus so that plants feed within the law of nature and showed some examples of soil changes, structure and plant green glow uprightness. Time limited any practical aspect of our method being discussed but all were happy with the points they had learned. Mr Liew, 69, and a trained agronomist sat with me and said it was the most mind opening 2 hours he had experienced, so I was happy at that.

Thursday we had a relaxing morning before flying to KL for me to get the flight home and some time for reflection on the plane. It was a busy trip, leaving those farmers keen to pursue our BD method with plenty to do, and they need stirring machines. On the way home I started wondering if I would get any flack, over the whole palm oil issue, when I spoke to others about my trip. After all it has a terrible image, some of it justified, with its very poor environmental record and attitude.

Then I thought that these small group of farmers had developed the consciousness to change the way they approach farming, and life, and to develop a Biodynamic example as the first glimmer of hope in an attempt to at least have a small part of their industry recognised for its quality methods and product.

I guess as BD farmers that is what we are all doing.

Darren Aitken