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- 1. PLANTING VEGETABLES CAN BE THERAPEUTIC**
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AHMAD A TALIB

PLANTING VEGETABLES CAN BE THERAPEUTIC!

Producing cash crops can be a profitable agricultural venture

ABANG Din is always busy pottering about in his small garden in Ulu Yam, just outside Kuala Lumpur. He's a retired government servant.

After retiring about five years ago, he chose to get out of the city and settled down about 50km from the federal capital.

He kept himself busy planting vegetables in pots, black nursery bags and he even used cans. In fact, he uses any discarded containers to plant *kangkang*, brinjals, several variety of chillies, cucumber and lady's fingers. There are fruit trees like mangoes and bananas, too, of course.

There are enough vegetables to feed his family. Often, he will share them with neighbours, who, in turn, will give him something else.

Abang Din seldom buys vegetables from the market any more. He's quite self-sufficient.

Abang Din took optional retirement after working as an architect for several years. When his wife got sick, Abang Din quit his job to look after Siti full time. The couple have three children — two girls and a boy.

Most of us are nowhere near Abang Din. We still drive to the market to buy *pandan* leaves or lemongrass for everyday cooking. Not to mention the few stalks of curry leaves for the chicken curry or *cili api* for *sambal belacan*.

Why can't we be like Abang Din? He made full use of his garden productively. No big containers are thrown away.

Imagine if Abang Din has a bigger plot of land! He could very well be selling his vegetables in the nearby wet market!

There are many others who are like Abang Din — landless, but have such green fingers that whatever they plant turns out well and can be turned into cash.

Abang Din can be a cash crop king if he's given the opportunity. He's no longer young, but he's accumulated a lot of knowledge in producing cash crops. Do you know that lady's fingers cost



Abang Din tending to his vegetable garden in the compound of his house.

RM6.99 a kilogramme in the hypermarket? That *limau nipis* costs RM7.99 a kg? Lemongrass averages RM3 for 10 thin stalks.

The same produce costs more in a normal wet market, again depending on weather and supply and demand. Abang Din doesn't worry about this at all. If he had not been an architect, I'm quite sure he would be building agriculture farms and helping to advance the national agriculture agenda.

Which brings me to my interview with Tun Daim Zainuddin about two weeks ago.

The former finance minister said producing cash crops can be a profitable agricultural venture. If all the idle land in the country is utilised, the country can partly reduce its huge food import bill.

Daim shared some statistics during the interview. There are 119,273ha of idle land in Malaysia — 117,198ha are in the peninsula and the rest in Sabah and Sarawak.

Pahang has the largest (34,293ha), followed by Johor (17,855ha), Perak (14,507ha) and Terengganu (12,309ha).

These lands have owners, but for some reason or other, they are

not utilised. In Daim's opinion, there is no proper coordination and monitoring of land use. The statistics above are just a summary of unused land for agriculture in 2018.

"There is an urgent need to reduce or even eliminate the bureaucracy between state and federal levels when approving land for use by interested farming parties," he said.

There have been many attempts to get these lands properly utilised. When asked if the landowners were lazy or have no money to develop them, Daim said there were instances when lands were given out in an uncoordinated manner.

At times, funding was also an issue. Which is why a properly coordinated and structured land utilisation programme has to be drawn up to avoid the land from being left untended and unproductive.

"There are many idle ready-built infrastructure within various agencies that needs to be revived through private sector partnership," he said.

I asked Daim for his views on what could be the biggest obstacle to making our agriculture sector really big and successful.

He said: "The biggest obstacle is the inability to market the products effectively. Because of the mismatch between supply and demand, prices fluctuate and the middlemen control prices. We need to make sure that there is a strategy that will not just look at the farming but also the downstream of manufacturing and distribution, especially export."

"Also, not enough attention is given to seed, fertiliser and feed manufacturing and supply," he said, adding that our farmers and entrepreneurs should focus on areas where they are good, such as tropical fruits and tropical fish.

He listed livestock farming, dairy farming, freshwater fish farming and cash crops or tropical fruits. Siti, Abang Din's wife has this philosophy: "Don't wait for others. If you think you can do it, don't waste time. Get up and start planting. Growing your own greens can also be very therapeutic!"

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