



Fresh produce are grown in the modest garden.

PICTURES BY NURUL SHAFINA, JEMENON AND ZULIANTE DZUL

Zero waste oasis in the city

A guesthouse boasting a green living concept offers guests more than just warm hospitality, writes **Zuliantie Dzul**



Lau hopes to have more hands on deck to spread awareness about green living and zero waste.



Guests are made to feel right at home.

THE wooden plaque on the wall next to the grilled door reads "Green Ideal Cottage". It's not exactly a cottage per se, but the corner-lot single-storey house complete with a thriving garden in Taman Desa Jaya, Kuala Lumpur nevertheless looks like a veritable oasis of tranquility.

A short-haired, bespectacled young woman stands at the entrance of the house, smiling as she beckons to me to enter her humble abode.

A fresh minty scent hits me as I enter the house with Lau Shu Ping, entrepreneur and owner of Green Ideal Cottage, a guesthouse that boasts a green living concept. It draws curious guests and like-minded nature enthusiasts to this side of town to stay and participate in activities that promote a green, zero-waste lifestyle.

Established in June last year, the guesthouse serves as a sharing space where Lau conducts classes on producing home-made, all-natural household products including soaps, essential oils and reusable wraps which are also sold at the premises and online. She recently participated in the Zero Waste Malaysia festival at Slate @ The Row, that saw a gathering of 15 vendors selling more than 100 zero waste-related products.

Swathes of multi-coloured tiles on the walls — green and white on one side, cheery yellow and white on the other — gives the living room a cosy vintage feel that somehow makes me feel right at home. There are shelves that showcase ceramic containers that, according to Lau, contain argan oil. Bars of soap and jars with beeswax and a host of other natural ingredients are also on these shelves.

The marble floor is cool to my feet as I make my way to the dining area. Pulling out a cushioned stool for me, Lau quickly heads to the kitchen without a word. As I wait for her to return, I can't help noticing the rows of small dark bottles of essential oil in one corner, which explains the familiar minty scent earlier.

Minutes later, Lau returns with a teapot and two small cups. "This contains rosemary and stevia. It's good for your digestion. I just picked the leaves from my garden," she tells me with a smile.

The steaming hot drink smells sweet and as I take a tentative sip, the lingering sweetness of the stevia is pleasant enough for me to enjoy the drink. "Refreshing!" I exclaim in delight and Lau beams at my reaction.

LEAP OF FAITH

"It has always been my dream to open a guesthouse," begins Lau, adding: "I didn't want it to be a mere stopover place where guests just check in and out. I wanted to offer more. I like backpacking and I've always preferred staying at guesthouses as opposed to hotels. This way I can discover new cultures and learn something from my hosts."

"This is exactly what I'm trying to do with Green Ideal Cottage. I call it a 'cottage' because it's a small house. But there's a lot you can do in a small space."

She stumbled upon the house while looking for a space to rent where she could conduct classes and run her business. She immediately fell in love with the old fashioned structure built in the 1970s. "It can be noisy," she admits, pointing out that the house is located next to the main road of the residential area. But the vintage look was too hard to resist.

She made a deal with the landlady that she would not change a thing as the house has sentimental value. "My landlady won't sell this house because her father left it for her. All the tiles you see here are the handiwork of her late father," she shares.

Guests can lead a "green lifestyle" during their stay here, says Lau. There's no air conditioning in the rooms and the menu offered is meatless. Guests can also enjoy the



Green Ideal Cottage is a guesthouse with a green living concept.



The bath sponge made from luffa.

TIPS

THREE STEPS TO ZERO WASTE

1. ASSESS YOUR TRASH

Start by rummaging through your trash recycling bins to determine the waste you create on a regular basis. Ask yourself as you sort through your trash: Do I need it? Can I buy it in bulk? Can I make it? Can I find reusable alternatives?

2. RETHINK YOUR SHOPPING

When considering buying a new product, ask yourself: Can I use something I already have? Can I go without it? Can I borrow or swap with neighbours and friends? Can I make, mend or repair a product rather than replacing it? Can I buy it second-hand? Can I buy a new product from a sustainable, eco-friendly company?

3. TRANSITION

As you begin to make sustainable changes in the way you shop, go at a pace that fits your lifestyle and your budget. Take time and use up what you already have before buying something new! This is an opportunity to declutter and to donate stuff that you do not regularly use, do not truly value or do not genuinely need.

[Source: janeandsimplerliving.com]

fresh produce from the garden. "I have water spinach and sweet corn, to name a few. I'm still learning the ropes of gardening though," says Lau with a chuckle.

She could have built a cottage closer to nature, but the idea and challenge of having a "green" guesthouse in the city excited her more, confides Lau. "It's like an oasis in the city. I wanted to show that it's definitely possible to lead a green lifestyle even if you're living in the city."

Guests can also learn how to make their own personal care products, such as soaps and massage oils, and take these products home. The ingredients are provided, including the essential oils which Lau buys in bulk from Europe. "I'm passing on the knowledge that I learnt and I'm hoping that, in turn, whatever knowledge has been derived can be passed on to other people by my guests."

It was a decade ago when Lau, the youngest of four siblings, learnt about soap-making. "My sister brought me to a class taught by a Taiwanese teacher. It was intriguing because I thought soaps were made using big machines. Little did I know that with just a few ingredients and some simple tools, you can actually make soaps at home," recalls Lau.

She subsequently decided to take a proper course so that she could make other bodycare products. These she distributed amongst her family and friends to try. Other than soaps, Lau also concocts her own shampoo, laundry powder and toothpaste which she claims is effective for those with bleeding gum issues.

"I received positive feedback and some friends suggested that I sell these products. So I did, to earn some side income as I had a full-time job back then as an administrator," shares the diploma holder in broadcasting.

Two years later, she took a leap of faith and quit her job to pursue her business full-time.



Vintage tiles give the space a cosy feel.

PICTURES BY ZULANTIE DZUL



The bottles of pure essential oil.

GREEN LIVING AND ZERO WASTE

Green living and zero waste are not new concepts, explains Lau. Worldwide, people have started to adopt this lifestyle ever since the effects of global warming became evident. Nowadays, there are many websites offering tips on how to adopt a greener lifestyle with zero waste.

Lau attributes her passion for green living to her parents, who live about 2km from her. "My mum taught us about separating our waste since I was in primary school. It's a small thing but it can make a huge impact. My retired dad is the biggest supporter of my products, especially the toothpaste because he also has dental issues," shares Lau, smiling.

The 34-year-old confides that her knowledge of green living has evolved since joining the Zero Waste movement, which guides people in changing their lifestyles and practices to emulate sustainable natural cycles, and where all discarded materials are designed to become resources for others to use.

Currently, over 23,000 tonnes of waste are produced daily in Malaysia, according to the Global Environment Centre. However, this amount is expected to rise to 30,000 tonnes by 2020. Living with zero waste may seem like a tall order, but as Lau puts it succinctly, we have to start somewhere.

"It starts with small steps to make a difference. For example, I encourage guests and my students to bring their own bottle for the oil. I also use whatever I can find to produce something else," she says, before

ushering me to the living room.

Picking up a weird-looking object that resembles a baguette, except that it has a coarser, fibre-like texture, Lau hands it to me. "This is luffa or sponge gourd. I plant this in my garden and the fruit can be turned into a bath sponge," she explains, chuckling at my bewildered look.

I learn that luffa is a vegetable that thrives in Mediterranean climate and belongs to the cucumber family. When the luffa fruit matures, it makes for a perfect and natural sponge suitable for skin polishing and scrubbing. And Lau has a large assortment of luffa which she's selling.

So how has her life changed? "Well, I hardly ever buy things anymore!" she replies with a grin, adding: "Why buy when I can plant it or do it myself, right?"

Moving forward, this KL-ite hopes to duplicate her Green Ideal Cottage concept elsewhere and she's looking for more franchisees. Excitedly, she tells me that there'll be a Green Ideal Cottage in Subang (which will open next month) run by one of her students. "There will be workshops conducted there as well."

As we near the end of our chat, Lau concludes: "I want more people to learn how to make personal care products. I hope to have more hands on deck. The classes are my contribution in spreading awareness about green living and zero waste. Green living should be simple enough that everybody can do it."

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