

Boiling Frogs In Hong Kong & Sydney

Jill Matthews, [Greenleaf Garden Design](#), March 2006

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Most readers will have heard of the vivid theory that if you expose a frog suddenly to boiling water it will make frenzied and immediate efforts to escape, whereas if you place a frog in cold water and slowly heat it to boiling point the creature will languorously enjoy the tepid pleasure until it turns pink and dies. It sometimes feels as if the gardens of Hong Kong could be behaving similarly. Having lived in Hong Kong until December 2002, I return annually. Consequently I see a series of Hong Kong snapshots. It distresses me more each visit to observe the increasing number of sunless heavily polluted days. During this last visit of ten days there was only one day that I could honestly describe as sunny and clear, and that was Chinese New Year's Day when normal polluting activities in both Hong Kong and mainland China were at a standstill. I was not alone in my perception: almost every morning shortly after dawn I walked down into the Hong Kong Zoological & Botanical Garden and the nearby Hong Kong Park. At that time most mornings the animals and birds in the zoo were as somnolent as I. On the sunny morning there was a party going on: the Siamang Apes were whooping, the Howler monkeys were howling, all the mammals were wide awake and moving excitedly around their cages, the wild cockatoos were swooping and screaming, even the caged birds were far more active than usual. Their euphoria reminded me of the feeling humans get when sunshine hits their skin after weeks of snow-laden leaden skies during dark London winters.

If this is the effect of Hong Kong's polluted days on her animal population, how must they be affecting her plants and trees that rely on photosynthesis for their immediate survival and growth? I think Hong Kong's Leisure and Cultural Services Department does a splendid job in the parks and median strips and other fragments of landscaped green space in the densely populated parts of Hong Kong Island. It was a great pleasure to observe their gardeners at work installing the New Year blooming plants in Hong Kong Park. Whole beds were being planted out with fresh-smelling potted chrysanthemums in vibrant bloom and hundreds of narcissus bulbs in bud calculated to open precisely at New Year.



Elsewhere huge pots of peach trees also in swelling bud were being moved into their display positions.



It was pleasing to consider that this process was part of a centuries old tradition from mainland China of moving growing plants and trees to enable them to be enjoyed out of season or climate or region. The market we explored on the Shenzhen excursion was another instance of this tradition in practice.

In the case of Hong Kong though, it is hard to escape the niggling thought that this practice may be becoming as widespread as it is, through increasing necessity. After all, many students of English horticultural history suggest that the greatest impetus towards the pervasive use of bedding colour in nineteenth century English garden design was the fact that the unregulated industrial revolution so polluted the air of London that long-term plants and trees died young there. It became necessary to ship in healthy plants from cleaner counties to maintain the parks and gardens of London. For some decades even mature trees sickened and died before their usual time. In a similar vein, could it be that Leisure and Cultural Services may be beginning to find that it is easier to ship in thriving mature plants than it is to maintain existing long term ones in an increasingly hostile microclimate?

I am not suggesting that this is the sole reason for the practice of shipping in bedding plants and trees from elsewhere to Hong Kong. Nor am I suggesting that the obvious problem of atmospheric pollution and change in microclimate is unique to Hong Kong. In my own garden in Sydney I have seen huge changes over the last thirty years. When I first planted this garden in inner Sydney we experienced approximately ten frosts each winter. One memorable year a single severe frost killed even my geraniums! The winters then were cold enough for me to grow many 'English' bulbs in the ground with no pre-chilling or forcing. Lots of the plants my English grandmother grew and loved in Cheltenham such as Alyssum, Erigeron, Heartsease, Lambs' Ears

and *Ageratum* happily naturalised in my Sydney garden with no encouragement from me. This is no longer the case. It is the tropical and semi-tropical plants that thrive here with no special attention and the 'English' ones that require cosseting. The summers are definitely getting hotter. I have had no frost here for more than a decade. The rainfall over our part of Sydney is significantly greater, although the rainfall in the city catchment area is decreasing. The city fathers face a real problem in supplying sufficient water for our growing city because of these changes, so everyone is being encouraged to install rainwater tanks and to grow natives or succulents instead of lawns and lush northern hemisphere water-guzzling plants. The plants that now thrive in inner Sydney gardens are increasingly like those that thrive in Hong Kong. Garages are now being covered by rampant Sky Flower Vines (*Thunbergia grandiflora*) instead of the Wisterias of the fifties. Crab Apples and Japanese Maples are out: Tibbouchinas and Bauhinias are in. Gardeners are struggling to change with their gardens.

Experts disagree about how much these changes are due to global warming and how much to changes in the urban microclimate caused by the very existence and nature of the city itself. The evidence is there in the history of my own garden and in my own memories. I suspect I am beginning to observe something similar during my visits to Hong Kong. So beware frogs and gardeners alike. The warm bath may not be the best bath. We need to pay close attention to the incremental changes in our parks and gardens and adjust as best we can. Forewarned is forearmed.