



Culinary Guardians and Seekers of Remedies: A Comparative Analysis of Edible Gardening Practices in Ulam Culture

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Abstract

This article examines two distinct yet interconnected typologies emerging from the study of ulam—traditional edible plants central to Malaysian culinary and medicinal practices. This research is based on a phenomenological study conducted in Penang, Malaysia. Adopting an abductive research strategy through purposive sampling, twenty four participants are selected. Their responses were then analysed into first order and second order constructs leading to the essences of their experiences which are captured into typologies. This article examines two typologies out of the four typologies in this study. The first typology, the Culinary Guardians, is characterized by individuals who preserve and transmit family culinary traditions and foodways (Chow, 2011). In contrast, the Seekers of Remedies focus on the medicinal and healing properties of plants, drawing on diverse knowledge systems to explore natural alternatives to modern medicine (Tan, 2018). By comparing their cultural narratives, motivations, and practices, this article sheds light on how traditional knowledge adapts in the face of urbanisation and modernity.

Keywords: *Culinary Guardians; A Comparative Analysis; Edible Gardening Practices; Ulam Culture*

1. Introduction

Edible gardening in the context of ulam encapsulates more than simply cultivating food; it reflects a rich tapestry of cultural heritage, traditional knowledge, and intergenerational transmission. Within the Ulam Gardening Club, two prominent narratives have emerged. The Culinary Guardians anchor their identity in a lifelong immersion in traditional cooking and food preparation (Senior, 2016), whereas the Seekers of Remedies engage with edible plants primarily for their therapeutic and curative

benefits (Rahman, 2014). This article outlines the core features of each typology and then undertakes a comparative analysis to highlight both shared values and distinctive differences.

2. *Typology 1: The Culinary Guardians*

The Culinary Guardians represent individuals deeply rooted in the traditions of edible gardening as an extension of family and cultural identity. Key characteristics include:

- **Cultural Continuity:** Their lifelong consumption of ulam, stemming from childhood experiences in kampung or farm environments, reinforces a deep-seated connection with nature and traditional foodways (Chow, 2011; Ong & Tan, 2010).
- **Culinary Expertise:** Trained in family kitchens and local food traditions, they exhibit a passion for cooking that is both personal and communal (Foo, 2012).
- **Integration of Garden and Kitchen:** For these individuals, the garden is a natural extension of the kitchen—a space where culinary ingredients are both cultivated and celebrated (Senior, 2016).
- **Mentorship and Knowledge Sharing:** Steeped in traditional foodways, Culinary Guardians actively share their culinary expertise, nutritional insights, and the healing powers of food with their communities (Ibrahim & Siti, 2015).

Case examples include NyonyaChef (pseudo name), who recalls childhood lessons under the watchful eye of a traditional chef; SeniorEducator (pseudo name), whose recollections link communal experiences with sensory memories of ulam; CookingHusband (pseudo name), who reconstructs the garden–kitchen dynamic of his heritage home; and MusicianHerbalist (pseudo name), whose cross-cultural culinary experiences enrich her approach to using fresh herbs.

3. *Typology 2: The Seekers of Remedies*

The Seekers of Remedies are primarily motivated by the therapeutic potential of plants. Their practices highlight:

- **Health and Healing:** With a focus on the medicinal and aromatic properties of plants, these individuals explore edible greens not just for their nutritional content but for their role in natural healing (Tan, 2018).
- **Intercultural Learning:** They often draw comparisons between Western medicine, Traditional Chinese Medicine (TCM), Malay healing practices, and Ayurvedic traditions, reflecting a synthesis of diverse medicinal systems (Lim & Ho, 2018).
- **Experimentation and Empiricism:** Many Seekers adopt a trial-and-error approach, empirically testing the efficacy of herbal remedies in response to personal or familial health challenges (Rahman, 2014).
- **Economic and Practical Considerations:** Beyond cultural interest, some seek these natural remedies as a more affordable alternative to conventional medical treatments, particularly when modern solutions are perceived as suppressive or accompanied by adverse effects (Tan, 2018).

Case examples include Flower Forager (pseudo name), whose familial background in traditional bone-setting spurred her interest in herbal innovations; Constant Gardener (pseudo name), a retired teacher who turned to herbal treatments following a family health crisis; and Agricultural Researcher (pseudo name), who leverages his scientific background to compare local ulam with TCM approaches.

4. Comparison and Contrast

While both typologies emerge from the shared context of ulam gardening and an appreciation for traditional plant knowledge, several differences and overlaps are notable:

- **Cultural vs. Therapeutic Motivations:**
 - *Culinary Guardians* are primarily driven by the desire to preserve cultural culinary practices, emphasizing nostalgia, family traditions, and sensory experiences (Chow, 2011).
 - *Seekers of Remedies* are motivated by the pursuit of health benefits, often experimenting with herbs to complement or substitute modern medical treatments (Lim & Ho, 2018).
- **Knowledge Transmission:**
 - Culinary Guardians typically learn through familial culinary practices and mentorship, preserving recipes and cooking techniques passed down through generations (Senior, 2016).
 - Seekers of Remedies blend anecdotal family knowledge with scientific inquiry, drawing on various traditional medicinal systems and self-directed experimentation (Rahman, 2014).
- **Practical Application:**
 - The culinary approach views the garden as an extension of the kitchen, with a focus on the aesthetics, Flavors, and ritual of food preparation (Ong & Tan, 2010).
 - In contrast, the remedial approach regards the garden as a living medicine cabinet, where the selection and use of plants are driven by their health-enhancing properties (Tan, 2018).
- **Response to Urbanisation:**
 - Both groups reflect a response to urbanisation and a perceived loss of direct contact with nature. However, Culinary Guardians emphasize the importance of culinary heritage in maintaining cultural identity (Ibrahim & Siti, 2015), while Seekers of Remedies focus on the pragmatic benefits of natural healing in a modern context (Lim & Ho, 2018).

5. Discussion

The dichotomy between the Culinary Guardians and Seekers of Remedies illustrates how traditional plant knowledge can serve multifaceted roles in contemporary society. On one hand, the culinary narrative offers a way to sustain cultural heritage amid rapid urbanisation by preserving food traditions and fostering communal bonds (Foo, 2012). On the other, the remedial narrative provides a framework for addressing health challenges in an era where modern medical interventions may be seen as impersonal or insufficiently holistic (Rahman, 2014).

The interplay between these typologies also highlights an emerging trend: a convergence where culinary practices inform health benefits, and medicinal knowledge enriches culinary experiences. Both approaches underscore the importance of locally sourced, naturally grown plants and demonstrate how traditional practices can adapt to contemporary needs (Chow, 2011; Tan, 2018).

6. Conclusion

In sum, the Culinary Guardians and Seekers of Remedies offer complementary perspectives on the value of edible gardening within ulam culture. While one group focuses on preserving culinary heritage and the social rituals of cooking, the other seeks to harness the curative properties of plants to promote health and well-being. Together, they reveal a rich tapestry of knowledge that is both culturally resonant and practically significant in modern urban contexts.

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