

**Durian (*Durio zibethinus*)**

# Halgolla Plantation Home

Accommodation of a different kind

– March 2015 –

As February draws to a close, we have had some very welcome light showers after several weeks of near drought.

The big event of the shortest month in the year was the removal of the large earth slips caused by the unbelievably heavy and protracted rain showers we experienced over last Christmas when we went for a whole week without seeing the sun, something unusual, to say the least, in our part of the world! While this was a very significant expense for us—keeping a PUBLIC access road open for the PUBLIC to use—we felt we had little choice, particularly given the fact that our neighbours in the adjacent squatter colonies would always provide volunteer labour whenever there was a crisis in the matter of access. We keep hoping that, with the change of President and government, there will be a return to some form of normalcy where private individuals will not have to maintain public utilities!

Our “adventures with water” continue despite the frequent (and sometimes very heavy) rains we’ve recently experienced and we believe we are truly on the way to having enough quality drinking water available in the event of a drought resembling the one we experienced a few years ago. “Better safe than sorry,” as they say!

After a significant shortage of home-grown fruit, primarily due to the depredations of the monkeys and giant squirrels, our mango and other fruit trees are loaded with blossoms, so much so that the ground and vegetation below the blossoms are coated with the glossy excess of nectar (?) from those flowers. A nice problem to have, indeed! The giant squirrels, however, seem to have discovered that Durian flowers (*Durio zibethinus*) are edible! Not a discovery benefitting the humans who planted those trees in the first place and who seek to now harvest the produce!

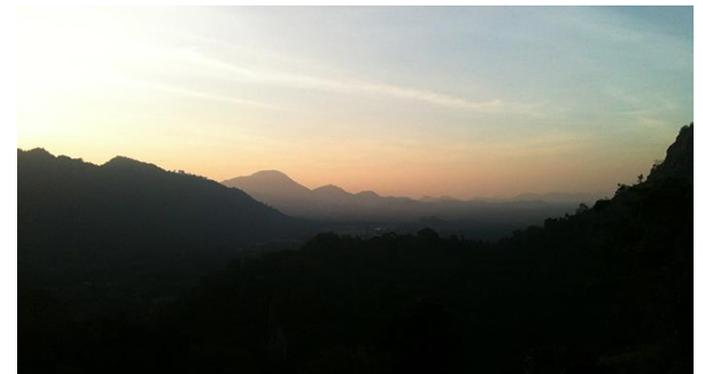
In the matter of wild animals, we’ve had a wild sow and five or six of her progeny frequenting our garden, within yards of the house, completely destroying row upon row of heliconia plants since they’ve discovered that the part of the plant below ground is edible! Even Natta, our “Heinz 57”, seems to have accepted them as a part of the scenery because she doesn’t make the din she usually does when

intruders of any description make an appearance on her turf, particularly after dark!



**Heliconia plants ravaged by the wild boar**

Having run a series on neighbouring (“day-trip”) places of interest, we are embarking, beginning with this newsletter, on a series of describing plants at HPH that have unique characteristics or histories attached to them. We start with a note on an “exotic” orchid that we are hoping to bring back to commercial viability, *Vanilla planifolia*.



**Sunset at HPH (photo courtesy of Shehan Madawela)**

Warm regards,  
Arlene and Emil

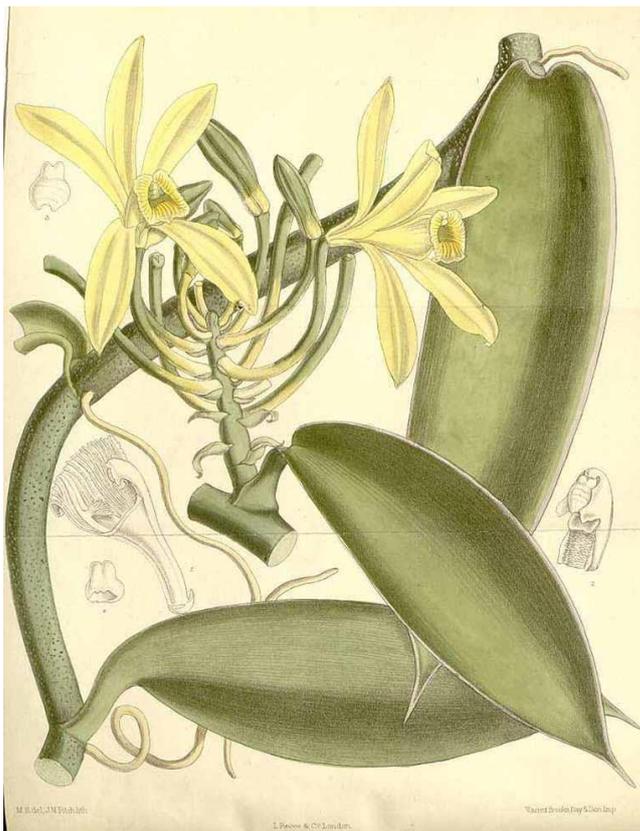
**For each booking in the month of March -  
a vanilla bean from our first crop  
and a sampler pack of HPH-grown and -roasted coffee  
and the “Surprise Basket” of HPH “goodies”  
which has become a trademark of HPH hospitality**

### **Halgolla Plantation Home**

- rated as [Best Home Stay](#) in Sri Lanka 2013
- recommended in the [Bradt Travel Guide for Sri Lanka](#) 5th edition, 2014

### **Plants of interest at HPH: Vanilla**

Vanilla is the second most expensive spice in the world (the top of that list is saffron, by the way) and the first van der Poorten to have cultivated it won a bronze medallion for an exhibit of the golden brown beans at the Paris Exposition of 1900 (if oral family history is to be believed!) The medallion in question reposes with a member of the third generation of Antoine Joseph van der Poorten’s descendants now resident in Prince Albert, Saskatchewan (Canada)! “Small world,” what?



*Vanilla planifolia* (from Curtis’s Botanical Magazine)

Vanilla, of course, is highly prized for its flavour, and while being unique in that respect, it also enhances the flavour of other foods and beverages such as coffee or chocolate.

What is unique about vanilla cultivation in Sri Lanka is that for the beans to form, every single flower has to be hand-pollinated because there are no naturally-occurring pollinating agents in Sri Lanka. In fact, it appears that, even in the Central American countries to which it is native, the pollinating agent(s) are so sparse that hand-pollination is essential if the crop is to be commercially viable.

At HPH, Mallika has indulged her newly-learned skill to bring some of our first vanilla blossoms to fruition, literally! All of us are re-learning this skill and we hope that before too long vanilla will return to commercial viability at HPH!



**Mallika hand-pollinating a vanilla flower**

One of the reasons that vanilla is so expensive, aside from its cultivation requirements, is the long involved 4-step process after picking—killing, sweating, slow-drying and conditioning. After picking, the pod is first killed by heating, freezing or scratching, which starts an enzymatic process that produces the distinctive flavour of vanilla. Then the pods are kept densely packed together to sweat. They must then be slow-dried to remove all moisture. Once fully dry, they are stored for 6 months in closed containers.

Though artificial vanilla is cheaper, nothing compares to the fragrance of true vanilla and it is well worth the extra cost as anyone interested in examining our first beans will vouch for.

HPH is highly recommended on Trip Advisor. See what our previous [guests](#) have had to say!



TripAdvisor Mobile and Tablet Apps

We are also on [Facebook](#). Bookings can be made on [Trip Advisor](#), [Airbnb](#), [HomeStay](#), [Booking.com](#) and [Agoda](#) as well as by contacting us directly.

Sri Lanka: rated as a top tourist destination by [The Lonely Planet](#); [Condé Nast Traveller](#); [The New York Times](#); [National Geographic](#)

If you have trouble accessing these links, let us know.

**For information or to book your accommodation, check our website [www.halgollaplantationhome.com](http://www.halgollaplantationhome.com) or contact Emil van der Poorten: [emil@halgollaplantationhome.com](mailto:emil@halgollaplantationhome.com) or by phone: 94-77-347-0702 or 94-72-284-9770**