

IX. END OF THE ROAD FOR *IMPERATA CYLINDRICA*?

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The other day, a young local biologist asked me what 'lalang' (*Imperata cylindrica*) looked like. Everybody used to know what lalang looked like, because it used to grow all along the roadsides. But not anymore. There are at least two species of grasses being planted along the new highways that criss-cross Malaysia. One is *Vetiveria zizanioides* and the other is something that has yet to be identified (probably *Urochloa ruziziensis*; Ed.). The space for lalang has therefore been pre-empted.

Furthermore, the highways are all fenced to prevent cattle and people from entering except at designated openings. Consequently, the old practice of keeping cattle and allowing them to roam has almost come to an end. Lalang used to be maintained as a fire climax by cow owners setting fire to *Imperata* fields on the roadsides. The cow owners have given up. Besides, open burning has become illegal.

Imperata will be missed by some of us more than others. Monsanto made its profits originally from the sale of Roundup, which was the most effective anti-*Imperata* herbicide ever invented. Rubber and oil palm estates used Roundup liberally. To cattle owners, the young shoots of *Imperata* were a free source of fodder. The mature leaves were used in a very interesting way by vegetable growers. Dried and chopped up into 15 cm lengths, they were laid on top of sowing beds for vegetables, especially *Brassicacae*. The seedlings would germinate and the grass blades on the soil would help to support and protect the tender plants. Otherwise, heavy rain or heavy watering would cause the seedlings to topple. *Imperata* was the best mulch because it would not go soggy and become host to pathogens. The rhizomes of *Imperata* are sweet and are used in the making of a cooling drink, now available in packets in supermarkets.

Perhaps this last use will ensure the survival of lalang, as a small speciality crop for the production of this drink. Would you like your lalang juice chilled or non-chilled?

Note by Editor: There are supposedly at least two taxa of *Imperata* in Malesia, which are perhaps in the field more easily distinct than in the herbarium. According to Ms. S.-W. Tan (formerly at SINU) the two species at least in Singapore can be distinguished as follows:

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| 1 | Culms hollow under the panicle, nodes usually glabrous. Panicle thyriform, 25–50 cm long, lowermost branches 5–13 cm long, spreading. Stamen 1 | <i>Imperata conferta</i> |
| – | Culms more or less solid under the panicle, nodes usually long-bearded. Panicle narrow, spiciform, 6–28 cm long, lowermost branches 2.5–5 cm long, appressed. Stamens 2 | <i>Imperata cylindrica</i> |

And then there is an enigmatic forma *intermedia* distinguished by Backer for specimens from Java found between 1000–2700 m altitude (up to 3415 m elsewhere?) that appear to be intermediary between the two species.

Culms 1–1.5 m tall; nodes glabrous or with a few hairs. Peduncle usually solid, rarely with a cavity. Panicles 15–31 cm long; lowermost branches 2.5–6 cm long. Stamen 1.

Especially field work seems most necessary to be able to sort this out.