



President Tharman Shanmugaratnam and his wife, Ms Jane Ittoogl, joining beneficiaries from Fel Yue Community Services, Singapore Association of the Visually Handicapped, The Helping Hand and The Salvation Army in putting the finishing touches on a Community Batik at a reunion event on Feb 22. ST PHOTO: JASON QUAH

Gardens by the Bay set to bloom as place of inclusivity

Plans include a quiet hour for visitors with autism, sensory trails for visually impaired

Thian Wen Li

Gardens by the Bay is set to become a more welcoming place for people with disabilities and special needs, with upcoming initiatives such as having a quiet hour for people with autism and an inclusive playground for children.

Starting from the second quarter of 2024, the Flower Dome will open an hour earlier on the last Saturday of every other month, to accommodate the needs of visitors with autism. During this hour, from 8am to 9am, music and announcements will be muted.

The Gardens has also worked with the Ministry of Social and Family Development to develop a 1,500 sq m playground for children, including those with disabilities. The new playground at the Active Garden community space is expected to be completed at the end of 2024.

These plans, among other efforts to make the gardens more accessible, were announced at a community reunion dinner by Gardens by the Bay chief executive Felix Loh on Feb 23. President Tharman Shanmugaratnam and his wife, Ms Jane Ittoogl, attended the event.

From October, people with visual impairment can expect to enjoy sensory trails in Flower Dome and the outdoor gardens, developed together with the Singapore Association of the Visually Handicapped (SAVH).

Conducted by trained Gardens by the Bay volunteers, participants can experience nature using their other senses and discover plants with interesting textures, shapes, sizes and scents.

This opens up a whole new world to the visually impaired, said Mr Faiz Selamat, executive director of SAVH, who hopes that other attractions would follow their footsteps.

"Not everyone will have a chance to travel to different countries or to experience different seasons," he said.

"They will not be able to appreciate the way we see cherry blossoms, on television for example. But they will be able to feel cherry blossoms on the face and the touch, and that is something which really excites our beneficiaries."

In addition, users of personal mobility aids will get priority space at Supertree Grove to enjoy the free music and light show Garden Rhapsody, which takes place every night at 7.45pm and 8.45pm.

The Gardens has also mapped out universal access routes for wheelchair users to move around easily within its premises, in collaboration with the Singapore Land Authority (SLA) and SG Able. In this pilot initiative, data relating to barrier-free routes were collected and mapped, and will eventually be added to the One-Map app as an additional mode of wayfinding.

Some of these initiatives will be for beneficiaries of partner social service agencies first, before even-

ually opening up to the general public.

In a speech at the event, Mr Loh said: "Beyond physical improvements, we also want to nurture an inclusive mindset too, beginning with our own staff and volunteers."

Separately, the Gardens signed an agreement on Feb 21 with Agency for Integrated Care, to improve experiences for seniors, especially those who are more frail or people living with dementia, and their caregivers.

Efforts include raising awareness about a new community engagement programme within the Gardens for seniors to enjoy curated activity sessions like making terrariums and visits to Flower Dome, as well as piloting a new horticultural therapy programme at nursing homes for residents.

Mr Loh said that Gardens by the Bay also aims to be an inclusive employer.

"Partnering with Autism Resource Centre (ARC), we hired our first batch of special needs individuals as horticultural assistants this year, after a period of training. Our new colleagues will be working alongside our horticulturists in the care and maintenance of the Gardens," he said.

Executive director of ARC Jacqueline Lim said the group is heartened by the Gardens' efforts to champion inclusivity and provide employment opportunities for those with special needs.

"They have shown how organisations can partner ARC Singapore to tap on the strengths and abilities of individuals on the autism spectrum and provide them with the dignity of work," she added.

with an@spph.com.sg