



ABOVE: PATRICK keeps his Bajong rice away from the other rice.

LEFT: SOME of the machines on the farm.

# Expensive to get farm ready

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**"T**HIS farm is fully mechanised from the time of nursery preparation to the time of drying. In order to be fully mechanised, the costs of getting the farm ready like preparing the fields and drainage infrastructure are high.

"The fields have to be at least 10 per cent flat to allow them to be efficiently irrigated but not too much of the topsoil should be removed in the levelling process to deplete the fields of its organic matter and fertility. The fields have to be sufficiently soft for the machines to plant the paddy and not too soft so that the machines sink into the ground. It's a delicate balance," said Patrick.

He added that the dryer was vital because bags of harvested paddy left for too long were rejected by buyers due to the formation of high levels of "alpha toxin" content. This is a major problem. When traditional farmers depend on the sun to dry their harvested paddy, it can be days even weeks before they can dry all the paddy causing the toxin levels to rise.

Patrick employed two experienced Taiwanese rice farming consultants six months to design his farm from scratch.

Taiwan, Japan and Korea are the leading modern mechanised rice farming countries in the world," he said.

He is grateful to Paul Bloom, director of the Department of Agriculture Sarawak, Henry Sijang, assistant director for Kuching Division, and Thomas Hill, managing director of Ceria Group, for sharing his vision of modernising

and mechanising rice farming in Sarawak.

"After my first harvest, I was lucky to meet Thomas who shared my vision for the modernisation and mechanisation of the paddy fields in Sarawak. Together with Dato Di Hana bin Sidi and Dato Afandi bin Tahir, we formed Ceria Agriculture Services Sdn Bhd, a joint venture with Ceria Group, to introduce mechanisation into the traditional paddy fields. We are getting a lot of help and encouragement from the Department of Agriculture and related agencies."

He said the major costs of mechanisation came from maintenance and fuel to run the machines.

Patrick, who has six workers and a supervisor to help him on the farm, said struggles for maximum land-use were vital.

"The most important aspect of running a farm is the cash flow. It's fortunate that I have some experience in financial management, so I was able to draw up a financial plan and budget for this farm. Even then, we have already overspent. But at least, we can identify the problem areas before it is too late."

He has seven ponds of two acres each where he rears patin and tilapia. If there is a drought, the ponds will supply water to the rice fields. He also has goats to help control the grass at the edges of the pond and feels that there is good synergy between these businesses.

Patrick has been contracted by the Sarawak Biodiversity Centre to plant some essential oil plants and some indigenous plants with medicinal values like Kemanggi, Haya and Nilam.

"They are harvested almost every month and provide me

with a steady cash flow to sustain the operation of this farm," he explained.

He is getting ready to plant maize for animal feed on 45 hectares of the land.

"I've been trying to clear the fields but can't because of the heavy rainfall in August.

"A rice farmer faces the risk of irregular incomes and is at the mercy of the weather, insects, birds and other pests. A farmer has to work on Sundays and public holidays. You go to bed with the setting sun and wake with the rising sun. That's a farmer's life."

"But you get the benefit of breathing fresh air and the satisfaction of seeing the products of your blood, sweat and tears. Farming is hard work but a lot of good healthy fun," he said.

To keep the pests at bay, he resorts to biological and chemical means. He has over 20 dogs to look after the security of his farm and some of the dogs help him to hunt down the mice!

Patrick has a degree in banking and finance and double major in accounting from Monash University in Australia and a Master in Business Administration (MBA) from Charles Sturt University, New South Wales, Australia.

He worked as the controller and then general manager in the offshore finance industry in Labuan, before he taking up rice farming.

"In the 1990s, as a schoolboy, I was lucky to visit wheat and barley farms in central New South Wales. I saw how the farmers used big machines on their big farms," said Patrick, who was also inspired by a documentary he saw a few years ago on wheat farming in Canada.

"They were providing plough-



PATRICK with the Kemanggi plants which he has contracted to grow for the Sarawak Biodiversity Centre.

ing services with big tractors, planting the fields with helicopters, spraying the fields with aeroplanes and harvesting with big combine harvesters," he said. He asked himself "why not in Sarawak?"

"Although having a fixed salary and working for a multinational company was good, it was the most boring 15 years of my life," he added.

Patrick urged more young people to take up farming but to do it the modern way.

"The traditional methods will not allow them to earn sufficiently to compete with the potential earnings they can get if they work for a wage in the cities and towns. Since Sarawak is blessed with vast tracts of good fertile land, farming should be a lucrative business if done properly," he said.

Patrick said producers of good rice would have no problems finding buyers for their crops because the rice millers in Sarawak had

permits to import 6000 tonnes of rice a month from Thailand and Vietnam.

"This means there is insufficient supply of local rice in Sarawak. The only problem is how much the buyers are willing to pay for the rice."

"Right now in Sememajung Malaysia, the rice farmers are selling MRQ219, the most common commercial rice at RM1.30 per kg. Last season, the rice millers and rice brokers in Sarawak were buying it for between 70 and 80 cents per kg."

"A higher price will encourage more people to enter the rice growing industry in the state. Besides that, the government can also look into relocating some of the

subsidies for importing rice to the local rice farmers," said Patrick.

"This will allow the rice millers and brokers to use those funds to buy the locally grown rice at a higher price. Reducing the rice imports will automatically increase the demand for local rice, thereby increasing the price, which in turn will lead to an increase in local production to meet the increased demand."

Patrick stressed that modernisation and modernisation of the traditional rice fields were vital for the development of rice growing industry in the state and to meet Malaysia's self-sufficiency target for the local rice industry.



A VIEW of the farmhouse on Patrick's farm.

