

Biology teacher among 4 winners of top environmental accolade

Mr Jacob Tan, a senior biology teacher at Commonwealth Secondary School, with the President's Award for the Environment at the Istana on Tuesday. It is the highest accolade for individuals, educational institutions and organisations that have made significant contributions towards the environment and sustainability in Singapore.
ST PHOTO: DESMOND WEE



He is honoured for spearheading school's indoor farming, other sustainability efforts

Cheryl Tan

Students of Commonwealth Secondary School are no strangers to indoor urban farming – they not only get to learn about the technol-

ogy behind it, but also get to play a part in producing the food they eat. The school currently produces about 100kg of greens every year, from spinach to xiao bai cai to basil, which is supplied to the school's canteen.

Behind this effort, which Mr Jacob Tan is spearheading, is a goal to turn Singapore's "30 by 30" vision – producing 30 per cent of Singapore's nutritional needs by 2030 – into a relatable concept within the school's context.

The 38-year-old senior biology teacher is the mastermind behind the school's sustainability efforts, where he looks to place national goals such as the "30 by 30" vision,

the Singapore Green Plan and the City in Nature concept into a school context, to help students better relate to and understand these concepts.

Mr Tan was one of four recipients of the President's Award for the Environment in 2023, which is the highest accolade for individuals, educational institutions and organisations that have made significant contributions towards the en-

vironment and sustainability in Singapore.

The other recipients were National Environment Agency chairman Lee Chuan Seng, the National University of Singapore and Keppel Corporation.

The ceremony for the award, which is in its 15th edition, was held at the Istana on Tuesday evening. It featured a farm-to-table menu curated from locally sourced

produce, such as kale and sea bass, from four farms in Singapore.

President Tharman Shanmugaratnam, who presented the awards, said: "The environmental challenges we face are interconnected: across regions, across generations, and across virtually every field of life. They can be tackled with innovation, bold initiatives and collective will, which today's award winners exemplify."

Mr Tan told *The Straits Times* that all Secondary 1 and 2 students are required to join the school's Farm to Table programme to help them understand how technology is used to help Singapore achieve food resilience.

Students also get to run science experiments with their teachers, he added, where they study how different wavelengths of light can impact the growth of vegetables, for instance, or how the energy consumption of such indoor farms could potentially be reduced.

Mr Tan was instrumental in turning the school campus into one which coexists with nature. Eco-habitats such as "rainforests" and "wetlands" have been created between classroom blocks, which have helped to attract wildlife, such as monitor lizards and snakes, to the school.

Students are taught how to react when encountering wildlife, which is something the Government is also seeking to address on a national level, he added.

"So it's important to have students see the linkages between nature conservation, food security and energy, how all of these things are interacting with one another to solve a complex issue like climate change," Mr Tan added.

About 50 per cent of the school's energy needs are powered by solar panels, and this gives students insight into how green energy is a viable alternative to fossil fuels.

A total of 61 nominations were submitted in 2023, said the Ministry of Sustainability and the Environment.

Since 2006, 45 outstanding environmental champions have been conferred the award, it noted. In 2021, conservationist Joseph Koh, Nanyang Girls' High School, DBS Bank, urban farm social enterprise Edible Garden City and port operator PSA Corporation were among the recipients.

tansuwen@sph.com.sg