

Grow the Sand Ginger!

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Botanically known as *Kaempferia galanga*, the sand ginger is a true ginger that belongs to the same plant family as the cooking ginger, Zingiberaceae. Unlike the common cooking ginger (*Zingiber officinale*), the rhizomes of sand ginger is not something that most people would be familiar with. Both rhizomes and whole plants can sometimes be seen on sale in selected wet markets in Singapore, such as those in Little India and Geylang Serai.



Above: The small rhizomes of the sand ginger.

Unsurprisingly, like many other plants, the sand ginger is known by a number of common names, which include the lesser galangale, East-Indian galangal and resurrection lily. The name “lesser galangale” can cause some confusion as it is often used to refer to another ginger, *Alpinia officinarum*. In Singapore, the sand ginger is most commonly referred by its Malay names: kecur or cekur. The Chinese here call the rhizomes “sha jiang” (沙姜) which directly translates into “sand ginger” and the whole plant as “shan nai” (山奈).

The sand ginger is closely related to the peacock gingers (*Kaempferia pulchra*) that are grown as ornamental plants in the tropical garden. It is found primarily in open areas in southern China, Taiwan, Cambodia and India, but is also widely cultivated throughout Southeast Asia. The sand ginger has uses in the kitchen, especially in Javanese and Balinese cuisine, where the rhizomes are used as a flavouring ingredient. The leaves are also served as vegetable in the Malay rice dish, *nasi ulam*.



Above: The peacock ginger (*Kaempferia pulchra*) is an ornamental relative of the sand ginger.

In general, the sand ginger is better known for its medicinal uses. In Malaysia, sand ginger rhizomes are used in traditional medicine for the treatment of hypertension, common cold, swellings, ulcers, sprains. The entire plant is either chewed to treat coughs and sore throat or pounded to make a poultice that is applied to relieve many ailments. It is a common ingredient of 'jamu' in Indonesia.

Also used in Traditional Chinese Medicine, the rhizomes of the sand ginger are available in dried form either sliced or powdered and are termed as 'Rhizoma Kaempferiae'. It is believed to be able to stimulate the functional activity of the stomach and promotes digestion and relieves pain. Rhizoma Kaempferiae is commonly used to treat indigestion, cold, pectoral and abdominal pains, headache and toothache. Its alcoholic maceration has also been applied as liniment for rheumatism.

The sand ginger plant is small and dainty that is almost stem-less. Unlike its more showy relatives, the elliptically-shaped leaves of the sand ginger are plain and light green in colour. At any one time, a plant produces just a few leaves that number between two to five, which are held horizontally on the surface of the soil and arranged in a rosette manner.



Above: Sand ginger plants growing in 'heaps'!

As new leaves emerge, they rest on top of older ones and with time, the plant takes on an endearing 'heaped' appearance. Depending on the growing conditions, leaves of the sand ginger can grow quite large and they can measure up to 15 cm in length and 10 cm in width.

The rhizomes of the sand ginger look somewhat like the miniature version of the cooking ginger. They are rather small in size and usually measure up to 5 cm and is covered with a dark reddish-brown skin and the interior is soft and white in colour.



Above: A single flower of the sand ginger plant.

Plants do flower when they are mature and growing conditions are conducive. Most of the time, a single flower is produced right in the center of each plant. Each flower bears some resemblance with that of a butterfly and is white in colour with a purple blotch in its center. Although visually appealing to look at, the blossom of the sand ginger has a very short lifespan and usually lasts only for a day. The flowers are quite fragile and could be damaged by light rain and drying winds.

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This ginger is occasionally sold as potted plants in some of the larger nurseries in Singapore. Otherwise, one can visit the wet markets at Little India and Geylang Serai and buy a small packet of rhizomes to get started. One should only buy rhizomes that are still plump and avoid buying those that have shriveled up or turned mouldy. It is not unusual to be able to buy rhizomes that already showed some new growth.



Above: Rhizomes bought from the market that showed some new growth.

To start growing the sand ginger from rhizomes, one can bury them at about a depth of 5 cm below the surface of the growing substrate in a pot of good quality potting mixture. Position the rhizome in such a way that the new growth is facing upwards. The potting mixture should be well-drained, friable, fertile and rich in organic matter. It should also be water-retentive and stay moist between watering.



Above: Position the rhizome in such a way that the new growth is facing upwards

If one is to grow them outdoors in the ground, do so only when the plant has produced 4 to 5 leaves. The environment that the sand ginger is to be grown should be slightly shaded and is moist and protected from drying winds. Suitable locations include below taller plants and hedges. Sand ginger plants make very good candidates as ground-cover plants in a herb and spice garden. They make very good container plants too.



Left: A happy apartment-grown sand ginger plant.

As a simple rule of thumb for its light requirements, the sand ginger prefers to have filtered sunshine for growth. In high rise apartments, it is best they get light of that intensity for 4 to 6 hours daily. Insufficient light will cause plants to exhibit lanky growth.

Hot and drying conditions should be avoided for sand gingers as that can cause leaves to curl up, leaf edges to turn dry and growth rate to be reduced. Plants should be kept moist at all times and not be allowed to dry out totally at any one time.

Plants should be fed to encourage vigorous growth and well-fed plants tend to produce larger and more attractive leaves. Sand gingers are happy if they are given regularly a solution of a balanced, water-soluble plant food, made accordingly to the manufacturer's instructions. Slow-release fertilizer pellets can be placed at the base and around the plant. Pellets should not come into close contact with the plant as they can cause chemical burns on the leaves.

Pests are seldom bother the sand ginger. Snails and slugs can become a nuisance when the plant is grown outdoors during the rainy season. The sand ginger can sometimes succumb to rot if it is grown in soil that is too clayey and badly drained.

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