

Red melon

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Suppose you want to grow more than lawn and live in balance with nature. We live in Thailand just north of Bangkok so we need tropical plants with not too many high-yield commercial crops bred to be harvested at one time. We want a steady supply of different things over time and we don't want to spray. We want our plants to form an ecosystem: to grow in harmony and look after themselves as much as possible. In Thailand too much hot sun can be a problem, so let's start with a perennial canopy plant that looks after itself.

A wild melon



The melon vine *Momordica cochinchinensis* grows wild in Southern China, SE Asia and northeastern Australia. In Thai it's called '*Fak Khao*'.

The Fak Kaho is a forest plant that thrives with a cool root-run in what gardeners would call poor soil. My mother planted seeds and put one young plant in the hole by a concrete car park.



That plant is now three years old. It was cut back and in the last four months new vines have scrambled over the trellis above the car park, snaked along the front fence and climbed up telephone wires into a mango tree 30 m away (see the first image).



Like all melons the plant has two types of flowers, male and female. Male flowers appear first. Female flowers tend to be further away, higher up, and the fruit hang under the leaves. The male flowers produce pollen that's collected and distributed by solitary oil-mopping bees.



Live Blue-tailed oil-mopping bee in the genus *Ctenoplectra* that's leaving a flower with oil, and pollen on its back. We see these bees in these flowers: nowhere else.

According to Wikipedia there are ten known species of oil mopping bee in Asia. They nest in small existing holes in trees or under stones where they store pollen and floral oils. It would be fun to follow one home but that's not easy.



I think that's a male of the same species. The hairs on the hind legs are used to remove oils collected on a pad of special hairs on the underside of the abdomen.

The plant is not damaged by insects, needs no spray or fertilizer, and has to be cut back close to the trunk every few months or vines would bury the house and take over the power wires up and down the street.



The female flower (right)

We eat the melons and give them away to enthusiasts. Immature green ones are sliced and added to stir fried vegetables and the ripe ones are added to Gaeng som, a red curry with prawns.