Database on medicinal herbs set to sprout

By Feng Zengkun

HOUSEWIFE Jenny Lam, 42, grows a plant called the seven-star needle in the garden of her condominium apartment, and eats a few leaves from it every week in the firm belief that it wards off diabetes and cancer.

“Sometimes I also give it to my dog when he’s sick, and he gets better,” she said.

A researcher from the National University of Singapore (NUS) wants to interview at least 100 people like her, who grow or buy medicinal herbs for their own consumption.

Associate Professor Koh Hwee Ling, of NUS’ Department of Pharmacy, says the medical effects of common herbs here have not been properly documented, and she wants to create a database of their benefits and side effects in a pioneering project.

From the interviews, Dr Koh and her team hope to produce a guide for homeowners who want to grow their own herbs.

Some plants may also be selected for experiments.

Already, about 80 people have stepped forward in the past year, with information on some 60 species of plants in all.

The most commonly used ones are aloe vera, ginger and bitergourd, believed to fight off hypertension, acne and flu.

More exotic remedies include chewing the bitter seeds from the fruit of mahogany trees, which is believed to prevent cancer. The trees are found along the east coast and in older estates such as Yio Chu Kang.

But Dr Koh hopes to carry out still more interviews to make the database comprehensive.

In particular, she and her team hope cancer patients and survivors will step forward with their remedies.

She said: “These patients are more likely to try different ways to help themselves, and their experience would be invaluable.”

Anyone who has used freshly grown medicinal herbs in the last five years may volunteer to be part of this project. They will be interviewed in person and be required to supply a sample of the plants they use.

They are also encouraged to share their medical records.

Dr Koh says the information will be kept confidential and volunteers can choose to withdraw from the study at any time.

The project is expected to end in 2013, but the team aims to complete all interviews by next September.

Volunteers can e-mail nus.medplant@gmail.com or call 6516–3120 and ask to speak to Dr Koh.