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Of Trees and Forest

The Amazing Flowers of Thailand

I HAVE traveled a lot across the Philippines and beyond our borders. Travel enriches a person's knowledge and broadens his perspective.

In business, my observations of the various places helped me in crafting innovative strategies. When I entered public service, observations about these places provided me with a better view of the Philippines – where our country has been, where it is now, what direction it should take to develop and grow, and how.

There are a lot of good ideas from other countries that can be replicated here, and I don't see any problem with using borrowed models for development, if these would benefit our country, for example, like the tourism industry. Tourism has been identified by our economic planners as a source of growth whose benefits are spread to the countryside instead of concentrated in the cities.

In my travels abroad, I am continuously amazed by the fruits and flowers of Thailand, whose natural attributes, especially the land and the weather, are not so different from ours. Thailand is flooded with orchids and other flowers. The whole country becomes beautiful because of its flowers.

I found that Thailand's long tradition of agriculture is no longer entirely devoted to growing rice, although it remains one of the world's biggest rice producers and exporters. Flower fields are now found across the country and have become tourist destinations.

Two flower farms are being promoted for tourism there, namely, the Dok Bua Tong in the Khun Yuam district boasts of a field of sunflowers and a camping site for visitors, and sunflower fields are also found along the Phatthana Nikhom-Wanmg Muang route, which attract the foreign visitors during the months of December and January, when the giant yellow flowers are blooming.

I'm amazed by the fruits of Thailand, too. It has all the sweetest and biggest fruits from guava to lanzones to durian to papaya and even mango. If fruits have feelings, I believe our locally produced fruits will be ashamed to be put on display side by side with the fruits from Thailand.

But, as far as natural endowments are concerned, I believe the Philippines is no different from Thailand. We have long and beautiful coastlines (Boracay is even recognized as the most beautiful in the world), and scenic spots (Mount Mayon has no rival in Thailand).

All things being equal, however, I believe Thailand's flowers and fruits give that country an edge over the Philippines when competing for tourists. Foreign visitors to Thailand exceeded 19 million in 2011, despite the massive floods that hit Bangkok and nearby areas. During the first six months of 2012 tourist arrivals reached 10 million, which means it will likely reach the 20-million mark by the end of this year.

In the Philippines, tourist arrivals totaled 3.917 million last year. In the first semester, tourist arrivals totaled 2.14 million, up 12 percent from 1.92 million in the same period last year. The Philippines' official target of 4.6 million for 2012 is not even a fourth of the number of visitors Thailand can expect.

Still, this is no reason to despair. We should stop at being amazed, and instead we do something about it. There are no secrets about making flowers bloom. We have the experts and the expertise to make the Philippines bloom also.

Considering our campaign to boost tourism as a source of employment and as a means to distribute wealth to the countryside, our efforts to build roads toward tourist destinations should be complemented with programs to promote flower production.

Increasing flower production will lower its prices and will, in turn, encourage homeowners, restaurant operators, and other business establishments to make flowers a permanent fixture in their premises.

My view is that we should have a fresh look at agriculture and agricultural research, and it should not be limited to high-value crops, but also include fruits and flowers. (To be continued)

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