What we can do to clean up our act
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SINCE Finance Minister Tharman Shanmugaratnam announced the Government's 2013 Budget, Singaporeans have engaged in an intense debate about productivity and our stubborn reliance on foreign workers.

Businesses have been exhorted to automate, using machines and information technology (IT) to help workers do more in the same time. Even more has been said about foreign worker quotas, dependency ratios, and levies.

However, the discussion seems to have mostly overlooked the role of Singaporeans in reducing the need for foreign workers.

One way is for Singaporeans to perform the work, such as construction and cleaning, that we supposedly refuse, but which people in Australia, Hong Kong, South Korea, Japan and New Zealand - with no easy supply of cheap foreign workers - all do. But, I'll leave that discussion for another day.

The other way to reduce the need for foreign workers is to change our habits and choices.

Let me elaborate in the context of two lines of work - gardening and cleaning.

The greenery throughout our island distinguishes Singapore from many other cities, and helps to make our homeland very liveable.

However, our Garden City depends on a small army of foreign workers to maintain trees, trim bushes, cut grass. All those trees, bushes and grass add up to a huge amount of maintenance work.

What to do? In the future, landscape architecture should emphasise design for maintenance.

Among the 10 trees featured on the National Parks Board website, only one, the Saga, is described as "low-maintenance".

Evidently, trees differ in the need for maintenance. If we gradually shift towards planting low-maintenance trees, over the long term, we will still reap a reward in shade, heat absorption, and oxygenation, but at a lower cost in dollars and foreign workers.

Is it really necessary to clear large areas and slopes, and plant them with grass?

Wouldn't it be equally green and much less costly to leave areas to grow wild?

If slopes have to be planted at all, can we use creepers or other plants that do not require frequent cutting?

From any viewpoint - aesthetic, climatic, or health - we do not need to make every open area look like a golf course with a manicured flat green.

Historically, another of our international distinctions was being one of the world's cleanest cities - due to good behaviour, inculcated through repeated government publicity campaigns.

However, in recent years, littering has returned (with a vengeance) and the dirty secret of our apparent cleanliness is another army of foreign workers, cleaning corridors, roads, foodcourts, everywhere.

Reducing the need for foreign cleaners will be challenging.

We must make cleanliness everyone's responsibility, not just the responsibility of cleaners.

The recent initiative for us to clear our own tables at foodcourts is a good start.

Indeed, the Government should bring back "Keep Singapore Clean" campaigns to instill the anti-littering message. Such campaigns may seem paternalistic and inconsistent with being a "world class" city, but, I feel that it is even worse to be Third World in mentality and pretend that we are First World.

An easier move is at the workplace. A cleaner comes twice a day to clear my bin. Obviously, that is not necessary, and the university has surveyed faculty members to ask how frequently we would like the cleaning service. Some of my colleagues chose once a week!

With the number of foreign work permit holders (other than in construction and domestic work) having ballooned by 55,000 from 394,000 to 449,000 in just five years between 2007 and 2012, the problem is evident.

Of course, to some extent, it is possible to increase the productivity of gardeners and cleaners through automation and IT.

But automation and IT go only so far - unless robots become so clever that they can cut grass on slopes and clear tables. Otherwise, we must all change our behaviour and quickly.

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