It was not until the early 1980s, after scientists had completed soil surveys on the Plain of Reeds, that alternative crops were recommended for 4000 square kilometres of highly acidic soils in the heart of the Plain. Melaleuca trees, pine-apple and cashew were proposed, because they are more tolerant to acidity than rice, and in areas where these crops were planted they have been doing well.

Over the past years the excavation machinery has ground to a halt, as the government faced budget shortages as well as debates about the merits of the canal building program in the National Assembly. In the meantime people all over the country are invited to settle in the Plain, or move in of their own accord.

Our guide, Mr. Quang, knows the Plain of Reeds like the back of his hand. For ten years he was a representative to the National Mekong Committee and today he works for the Ho Chi Minh City Institute of Water Resources Planning and Management.

Mr. Quang has arranged a four-wheel-drive car and a high-powered motorboat to travel into the Plain of Reeds. After about an hour of driving from Ho Chi Minh City to Tan Thanh, a small town in the Plain of Reeds, Mr. Quang signals the driver to stop. An exquisite scent pervades the air. "It's cajeput, an aromatic oil," Mr. Quang says. "In huts along this road people distil the oil from the leaves of the wind-melaleuca, a small variety of the common melaleuca tree. It grows in the wild here."

At the side of an open hut nearby two men are heaping up fresh leaves. Inside a girl pushes already used leaves in the oven as fuel. Yes, she says, it takes a lot of work to make cajeput oil, but it fetches a good price on the market. It means extra earnings for her family which farms in the vicinity.

Behind the hut is a small canal. The water is as clear as tap water. "This canal is maybe five years old," Mr. Quang says. "The water is still very acidic, more sour to the taste than a lemon. No fish or insect can survive in it, and almost no plants. What you see is Nymphus, a kind of lotus, and Eleocharis grass. Both indicate acidity. Farmers often look at the type of grass in a field before making a choice of crops.
Nobody would even try to grow rice here now, the acid must be flushed out first.

At the other side of the canal is a small farm, accessible by a 'monkey bridge', a breezy structure of poles and planks. In front of the house a young man and woman are cleaning cassava tubers for a meal. Two children are playing with sticks and stones, a baby is sleeping peacefully in a hammock.

"We made 'raised beds' in the fields," explains the farmer, "so that we can grow crops even when the land is acid. We dig rows of ditches in the field and heap up the soil along the ditches to make rows of plant beds. The topsoil is less acidic than the deeper layers, so the beds consist of two less acidic layers of topsoil. We can grow cassava, yams and sugar cane on them. The acid is flushed into the ditches with the rains and flood water. At the same time the water in the ditches keeps the soil from drying out and becoming more acid."

Raised beds are commonly used all over the delta wherever people grow upland crops like fruit trees and vegetables in water-rich areas. The beds keep the crops high and dry, while the ditches serve for drainage and irrigation. Permanent beds are made for long-term crops like fruit trees or ginger, while beds for seasonal crops are levelled after harvest to make way for rice in the rainy season.

On this farm the beds will stay at least until the acid has flushed out of the soil. For now the family can't grow rice, nor can they use the water in the canals. By the house a mortar jar collects rainwater from the palm-thatched roof. On the acid soils farmers and crops are tolerant.
1. The entire delta is criss-crossed with canals, some centuries old, many new, all straight as an arrow. The reason for digging them in the past was mainly transportation: boats are practical in this country of water and swamps. Today, in the Plain of Reeds, canals are dug not for transportation but to open up the land for rice cultivation.

2. Farmers who grow cassava on 'raised beds'.

3. Cajuput oil distillery. Leaves of the wind-melaleuca tree are boiled with water in a barrel for several hours. The oil drifts up to the surface and is guided through a pipe to a jar filled with cold water to cool, before flowing into a bottle. The oven is stoked with wood and used leaves.