The basic unit of the Chinese language is the zi (字), i.e. a Chinese word. Each zi has a written form (called a character, made up of strokes), a sound (made up of consonant and vowel) and a meaning (or multiple meanings). When we speak or write Chinese, we string zi together to form terms, phrases and sentences.

This week: Words about horticulture

草 (cao) (Putonghua, 3rd tone), cho (Cantonese 2nd tone)
Basic meaning: grass, herb

草, with radical艸 (草) means herbaceous plants: 含羞草 (han xiu cao = contain-shyness-grass) = mimosa; 煙草 (yan cao = smoke-grass) = tobacco; 小麥草 (xiao mai cao = little-wheat-grass) = wheatgrass. 草坪 (cao ping) = grass patch. 草原 (cao yuan) = grassy plains. 穂草 (liang cao = grain-grass) means grains for army consumption.

藥草 (yue cao = medicine-grass) means medicinal herbs, e.g. 夏枯草 (xia ku cao = summer-wilt-grass = spica prunellae, good for reducing internal wet-heat). 中草藥 (zhong cao yue = China-grass-medicine) means Chinese herbal medicines (alternative to chemical drugs).

草 also means brief/rough. 草書 (cao shu = grass-writing = “grass script” calligraphy), brushstrokes run wild as in abstract paintings.