

State yields nine new plant species in 2018

Discoveries include orchids, shrubs, and herbs

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The year that passed saw the discovery of nine new plant species from Kerala. These include orchids, shrubs, and herbs.

The new orchid *Oberonia muthikulamensis* hails from Palakkad's Elival hills (north of the Malampuzha dam). A team including researchers from Kottakkal Arya Vaidya Sala's Centre for Medicinal Plants Research (CMPR) found it growing on moss-covered tree branches in the thick evergreen forests. In their study published in the *Nordic Journal of Botany*,

the researchers mention that they located only 20 plants during the survey. The Elival hills also yielded a rediscovery around the same time: CMPR researchers and their colleagues came across the small shrub *Hedyotis beddomei* 144 years after it was first reported.

Another orchid, *Rhynchostylis cymifera*, was also discovered from the deciduous forests of Nilambur in Malappuram by a team including researchers from Mahatma Gandhi University. According to the researchers, the location of just nine individuals in the area hints that the species could be listed as 'critically endangered.'



The edible berry of *Eugenia kalamii*, discovered from Wayanad's Periya forests; (right) *Piperomia ekakesara* from Idukki's Mathikettan Shola National Park.

While studying *Eugenia* plants (relatives of wild *jamun* trees) in the Western Ghats, scientists at Jawaharlal Nehru Tropical Botanic Garden and Research Institute (JNTBGRI), Thiruvananthapuram, collected a distinct specimen from the Periya forests of Wayanad. After



taxonomical studies based on morphology, comparison with herbarium specimens, review of relevant literature and field observations, it turned out to be a species new to science: *Eugenia kalamii*. The shrub is common in the undergrowth of the evergreen forests here, says S.M. Shareef of JNTBGRI.

"Surveys in surrounding areas including Karnataka could reveal its presence in other areas nearby too," he added.

Another team from the JNTBGRI discovered a two-metre tall evergreen shrub bearing pale white flowers from the higher reaches of Thiruvananthapuram's Agastyamala. The team found only 200 plants of the species, *Ardisia agastyamalayana*, in the entire area despite repeated surveys. The hill range is also home to a new sedge (grass-like plant), *Fimbristylis agasthyamalaensis*, found researchers at University College, Thiruvananthapuram, earlier last year.

Other new species recorded from Kerala over the year include *Lagenandra cherupuzhica* (a creeping amphibious herb) and grass *Dimeria kalerii* from Kasaragod's lateritic hills, a bladderwort *Utricularia sunilii* from Palakkad's Nelliampathy and *Piperomia ekakesara* (a small herb from the Mathikettan Shola National Park).

Detailed surveys are helping discover more species, says Santhosh Nampy, head of the University of Calicut's Department of Botany, one of the scientists who discovered the *Piperomia*. "More such surveys could reveal more new species," he adds.