

# Rare orchid flowers flourish at JNTBGRI

*Druryi's paphiopedilum* has bloomed profusely at the institute for the first time

AATHIRA PERINCHERY  
KOCHI

*Druryi's paphiopedilum*, an orchid that once thrived in the Agastya hill range but whose numbers have dipped drastically over the years, is now flowering in profusion at Thiruvananthapuram's Jawaharlal Nehru Tropical Botanic Garden and Research Institute (JNTBGRI).



**Taming the wild:** The *Druryi's paphiopedilum* orchid in bloom on the JNTBGRI campus in Thiruvananthapuram.

The yellow blooms first appeared in the first week of January at the JNTBGRI's field conservatory, where researchers are performing seed culture to grow the orchid. Researchers achieved this by taking seeds from wild plants from the grasslands of Agastyamala and growing them in an artificial environment (such as a greenhouse). A project to study the species had been conducted since 1991 at the institute, and with scientists realising the precarious position of the orchid in the wild, another project to germinate the seeds and propagate the orchid began

in 2000.

It was a long shot. For while the orchid is only found in the cool climes afforded by an altitude of 1,200 to 1,500 metres above sea level (ASL), the JNTBGRI campus resides at an elevation of 150 metres ASL at Palode in Thiruvananthapuram. But the project has yielded results – beautiful yellow blooms, each in the shape of a lady's slipper (paphiopedilums belong to a group of lady's slipper orchids) – for the past four

years. Yet, never have the several plants housed in around 60 pots at the JNTBGRI flowered in such profusion.

"It could be that the plants have acclimatised to the climate in the campus," said William Decruse, one of the scientists involved with the project.

## Colder winter

However, the JNTBGRI campus, just like many parts of Kerala, also faced unusually lower temperatures than normal

this winter. According to Dr. Decruse, November saw an early withdrawal of rain and the mercury dipped to as low as 15 degrees Celsius in December. He agrees that this could also be a factor that may have triggered the copious blooms.

The paphiopedilum orchids are being grown in JNTBGRI to conserve the species and for potential reintroductions to the wild. And the *Druryi's paphiopedilum* needs all help: it is listed as Critically Endangered by the International Union for the Conservation of Nature (IUCN). A study in 2001 reported the orchid in only three localities on Agastyamala and there may be fewer than 250 plants in the wild (a decline caused possibly by indiscriminate collection). The species is listed in the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Flora and Fauna (CITES) that prevents its illegal trade, and it is also protected by India's Wild Life Protection Act.