



Where I work Bhathiya Gopallawa

My workspace at the University of Peradeniya, Sri Lanka, includes shelves stacked with rare, preserved plant specimens. But I also work in the country's lush forests, a tropical biodiversity hotspot filled with a trove of indigenous plants. My passion for scouting the forests for herbs escalated in 2016, when I joined the National Herbarium in Kandy, Sri Lanka, as a project assistant for the national botanical survey.

I realized that, on my island nation, there are many understudied herb families. I am studying one of these, Piper, for my PhD, collecting samples from the Walankanda forest. In March 2021, a researcher working there sent me photographs of a flower. At first, it seemed to belong to the Zingiberaceae, or the ginger family, but its leafless nature then suggested otherwise. An analysis revealed that this species was a previously uncharacterized terrestrial orchid. In this photo, I'm holding a preserved specimen of it.

This orchid is non-photosynthetic and relies entirely on symbiotic fungi for

nutrients. It has a three-week flowering period during which the flowers stay in bloom for only three days. This makes it challenging to identify. I relied on an island-wide network of early-career researchers for data collection – their help was crucial to bring this new species to light.

I named it *Gastrodia pushparaga*, after the pushparaga yellow sapphire that is found in my country. Not only because the amber-hued flower, streaked with red, resembles the gemstone, but also because discoveries of indigenous species are precious assets to Sri Lankan biodiversity. This remarkable discovery by a team of young scientists comes at a time when academia in my country is severely challenged by an economic crisis and an exodus of researchers to wealthier countries. With few botanists around to study herb families in Sri Lanka, my goal is to keep unravelling the taxonomies of these plants.

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Photographed for *Nature*
by Kumudu Wijesooriya.