Researchers discover eight new Thai plant species

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Researchers in the Trinity Botany Department's Herbarium, together with Thai collaborators, have just discovered eight species, three subspecies and four varieties of the plant genus Eriocaulon from Thailand, all new to Science.

Commenting on this work's significance Professor of Systematic Botany in the School of Natural Sciences John Parnell stated: "This confirms the extraordinarily high numbers of plant species in Thailand, that Thailand is a centre of plant diversity and that, even in the 21st Century, very many new plant species still await discovery there".

Estimates suggest that there are about 13 times more plant species in Thailand than in Ireland. Unlike Ireland however it is impossible to be sure exactly how many plant species there are in Thailand as many have not, yet, been found.

This study of Eriocaulon involved widespread and extensive plant collecting over many years often in poorly explored and remote areas of the country. The DNA of the collected material and their morphology were analysed. This enabled comparison to be made with known existing species of Eriocaulon and material that was different could then be recognized as new to Science.

Ireland's link with the plants of Thailand can be traced back to the early part of the 20th century when a TCD medical graduate, AFG Kerr from Co. Leitrim, became interested in plant collecting in the wild and sent

many of his collections to the TCD Herbarium.

Unfortunately, though there are many forest reserves in Thailand, plant species are still in danger of extinction before they are discovered and described. This is because the number of plant collectors working in the forests of Thailand is low relative to the size of the flora and because anthropogenic pressure on natural vegetation is high.

It is absolutely essential, therefore, that plant collecting activity is speeded up. This will ensure that scientists know where the greatest plant biodiversity is located and are able to delimit, accurately, the boundaries of nature reserves. This is especially important as climate change and other anthropogenically mediated activity is likely to significantly alter the disposition of vegetation in the country.

The Flora of Thailand project aims to describe all plant species growing in Thailand and the work on Eriocaulon forms part of this work. The Herbarium of Trinity's Botany Department is one of the lead collaborating institutions participating in this project.

Provided by Trinity College Dublin

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