

Scientists rediscover small Brazil tree, 185 years on

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Image of a branch of a tree that was believed to be extinct, *Ilex sapiiformis*, better known as *Ilex de Pernambuco*, in Brazil. Credit: © Fred JORDAO / Wild Project/AFP

A species of small holly tree that was last seen nearly two centuries ago and was feared extinct has been rediscovered pluckily clinging to life in an urban area in northeastern Brazil, scientists said Tuesday.

The tree, "[Ilex sapiiformis](#)," was found in the city of Igarassu, in Pernambuco state, by an [expedition](#) that spent six days combing the region in hopes of finding it, said the [conservation group](#) that backed the project, Re:wild, co-founded by Hollywood star Leonardo DiCaprio.

Better known as the Pernambuco holly, the tree was first documented in Western science by the Scottish biologist George Gardner in 1838.

His collection was the only confirmed sighting—until March 22, when the new expedition found four of the trees on the bank of a small river in the city of Igarassu, just outside the state capital, Recife.

"It's incredible that the Pernambuco holly was rediscovered in a [metropolitan area](#) that is home to nearly six million people," Re:wild's lost species program officer, Christina Biggs, said in a statement.

"We don't often think of plants as being lost to science, because they don't move like animals, but they are every bit as integral to the ecosystems they are native to."

The team found the plants after following a trail of small white flowers characteristic of the species.

"It seemed that the world had stopped turning its gears," said expedition member Juliana Alencar.

"Nature surprises us. Finding a species that hasn't been heard of in nearly two centuries doesn't happen every day. It was an incredible moment."

The expedition leader, ecologist Gustavo Martinelli, said the group now hopes to start a breeding program for the tree.

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