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To mum, with love

By CHESTER CHIN
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A MOTHER'S unwavering support for her son's nature conservation efforts has led to her name being immortalised as an extraordinary-looking flowering plant.

Scientists at Oxford University and Malaysia have named a new species of the "fairy lantern" plant *Thismia sitimeriamiae*, after a Terengganu-born explorer's mother, Siti Meriam.

Photographer and independent researcher Suzairi Zakaria, 45, better known as Dome Nikong, first discovered the plant in 2019 growing along a popular tourist track on Gunung Sarut, Terengganu.

He then teamed up with Oxford University scientist Dr Chris Thorogood and Forest Research Institute Malaysia's Dr Siti-Munirah Mat Yunoh to study the fairy lantern plant.

According to Suzairi, his mother had been elated when she found out about the plant being named after her.

"I feel so happy to be able to name this new plant in honour of

my mother. She was very touched when she found out," he said in an interview.

Suzairi added that many people have since contacted him to let him know that they like the classic-sounding name.

This is the third flower plant from Terengganu that has been successfully described. The first two, according to Suzairi, were *Thismia terengganuensis* and *Thismia domei*.

Race against time

Suzairi said Malaysian researchers need to be diligent in researching the country's natural biodiversity.

"The search for new species needs to be carried out aggressively as there are many forests in our country that have been destroyed on a large scale. It would be a great loss if we lose a species before we were able to scientifically describe them," he said.

Oxford University, in a statement, said the flower lantern plant is "among the most extraordinary-looking of all flowering plants".



Suzairi first discovered this fairy lantern plant in 2019, growing on Gunung Sarut, Terengganu. — YouTube

"These curious, leafless plants grow in the darkest depths of remote rainforests where they are seldom seen," the university said.

"Their mysterious flowers emerge just briefly, and often under leaf litter, so few people are lucky enough to encounter them," the statement said.

According to Oxford University, the new *Thismia sitimeriamiae* species described by Suzairi and researchers has a "unique and peculiar orange, lantern-like flower holding up a so-called 'mitre' –

an umbrella-like structure, the function of which is a mystery".

"The plant's unique and remarkable 'mitre', colour and surface texture make *Thismia sitimeriamiae* among the most eye-catching plants ever described from Peninsular Malaysia," the university said.

Suzairi is also known for his travel photography and photography projects on indigenous communities in Malaysia. Many of his works have been featured in the local tourism sector.