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Saving Thailand's wild medicinal plants

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As forests disappear so do the herbal plants used in Thai traditional medicine, special protection areas & methods to grow outside of forest needed.



Photo: *Capparis micracantha* (Thai: *saema thalai*) that has uses in the treatment of cancer and tuberculosis.

Up to 1,800 wild plants under threat

Efforts on to save key herbal remedy sources
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About 1,800 species of wild plants currently used as key ingredients in herbal medicines are on the verge of extinction, Public Health Minister Witthaya Buranasiri said yesterday.

Deforestation was a major cause of the problem as most of the more important herbal plants are only found in forests, he said. Many cannot be cultivated due to a lack of research in how to grow them properly, he said.

As a result, the ministry is discussing with the Natural Resources and Environment Ministry, the Agriculture and Cooperatives Ministry, non-governmental organisations, and local communities efforts to jointly ensure that these important local herbs not only survive but thrive.

One option under discussion is the expansion and increasing the number of so-called "herb conservation areas" where the plants are endangered.

Those who encroach on or try to reclaim forests in the herbal conservation zones could face legal action brought by the Natural Resources and Environment Ministry.

The Public Health Ministry, meanwhile, had set aside about 76 million baht to fund projects to protect and propagate at least 50 species of herbal plants each year, said Dr Paijit Warachit, permanent secretary for public health.

The 50 plants topping the list include *thaowan priang* (*Derris scandens* Benth), *chet moon phloeng daeng* (*Plumbago indica* L.), *hor saphan khwai* (*Reissanithia grahamii*), *kamlang suea khrong or birch* (*Betula alnoides* Buch.-Ham.ex G. Don.), *chan khao* (*Diospyros decandra*), *chan daeng* (*Dracaena loureiri* Gagnep), *phraya rakdam* (*Diospyros rubra* Lecomte), *saema thalai* (*Capparis micracantha* DC.), and *Kwao khrueta khao* (*Pueraria mirifica* Airy Shaw et Suvatav).

Of these, *Kwao khrueta khao*, *chan khao*, and *chan daeng* are the most endangered, said Dr Paijit.

Currently 20 areas have been declared plant conservation zones, said Dr Suphan Srithamma, head of the Department of Development of Thai Traditional and Alternative Medicine.

Nine more forest areas will likely be added to the list of zones, he said.

They are Pa Kham Hua Hat in Udon Thani's Thung Fon district, Pa Nong Paen in Bung Kan's Phon Charoen district, Pa Dong Kheng in Khon Kaen's Nong Song Hong district, Pa Wat Khao Phanom Kao in Phichit's Wang Sai Phun and Taphan Hin districts, Pa Watthanatham Nong Hi in Maha Sarakham's Chiang Yuen district, Pa Chumchon Nong Samhat in Yasothon's Pa Tiu, Pa Sun Kan Sueksak Phatthana Phuphan in Sakhon Nakhon's Muang district, Pa Chumchon Tha Samakkhi in Lampang's Thoen district, and Pa Wat Pong Kham in Nan's Santisuk district