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Guinea selects national flower for the first time with help from Kew Gardens



Vernonia djalensis, Guinea's new national flower, is a critically endangered species CREDIT: CHARLOTTE COUCH

By **Jennifer O'Mahony**

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The West African nation of Guinea has chosen a national flower for the first time, with citizens voting for a critically endangered species under threat from housing developers.

Guinean and British botanists have partnered since 2005 to identify rare plants and push for greater conservation in a country where up to 10 percent of species may be menaced with extinction.

They organised a competition nationwide which ended last week, and have awarded the *Vernonia djalensis*, or Chardon de Djalon, the crown.

The fuschia-coloured plant has the appearance of a spineless thistle, and is found exclusively in a 2.2-mile square area in the Fouta Djallo mountains of central Guinea.

“It is only found at one site. That site is threatened with housing, it has already been allotted for a housing development,” said Ms Charlotte Couch, a British botanist who leads a partnership with Kew Gardens in Guinea.

The flower is only found within 2.2-mile square area in central Guinea

“We increased the threat level because we can’t find it any of the historic sites any more,” she added. “If this plant goes extinct here it is extinct for the whole world. A lot of these species only exist in Guinea.”

Guinea has never had a national flower, and the scientists decided to launch the national competition with regional finalists in order to highlight and protect the unique plants growing in the coastal nation.

“Guinea has a really high diversity of plants because of the different topographies that it has,” including high plateau, mountains and forests, Ms Couch noted.

The botanists’ recent promotion of Guinean plant life has mobilised schoolteachers to push for greater inclusion of botany and conservation in the national curriculum, after realising the number of species threatened.

Guinea has around 3,000 plant species, with two uncovered in the last year alone, but conservationists face an uphill battle with authorities keen to push development on rural land, said Dr Sekou Magassouba, director of the national herbarium.

“It’s a huge challenge because our vision and that of the population and authorities isn’t the same,” the botanist said, as he leads a push for formalised conservation plans in the country.

Guinea is currently expanding its bauxite mining sector and the slash and burn method of agriculture remains commonplace, threatening already endangered species.

The winning status of *Vernonia djalensis* will now be submitted for government approval before it becomes the nation’s official national flower.

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