

The dark side of Vader begonia

Mystery plant wields star power as forces go to war over it

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KUCHING: It is called the Begonia "Darth Vader" but despite the powerful *Star Wars* character it is named after, the plant species, endemic to Sarawak, is helpless against smugglers who take it out of the state.

The *Begonia darthvaderiana* is a hit online. At US\$80 (RM290) for a small plant, it is one of the most expensive begonias.

Named as such because of its all-black leaves, the species was "discovered" last year by foreign researchers hiking near the Batang Ai dam bordering West Kalimantan.

Authorities in Sarawak only became aware of the plant and the high price tag it carried when a

Facebook post landed in the inbox of a Sarawak Forestry Corporation employee.

All begonias are protected under the Wildlife Protection Ordinance 1998.

Local begonia experts said they had never seen the plant and the few photos available were unlikely to have been taken by locals.

In the scientific paper that first published the discovery, a trio of Taiwanese researchers said they found the plant growing along "deeply shaded soil slopes" near the dam, which is about a five-hour drive from here.

"The epithet refers to the resemblance of the dark appearance of this new begonia to that of Darth Vader, the fictional warrior in the *Star Wars* movies," wrote Che-Wei

Lin, Shih-Wen Chung and Ching-I Peng of the Taiwan Forestry Research Institute and Taiwan Biodiversity Research Centre.

In the same paper, they also named another new species, *Begonia amidalae*, after Padmé Amidala, the love interest of Darth Vader and mother to protagonists Luke Skywalker and Princess Leia.

Julia Sang, who co-wrote the book *A Guide to Begonias of Borneo*, has been in contact with the Taiwanese researchers.

"I have never seen the plant," Sang said. "We had to get the foreign researchers' permission to use the photo of the *Begonia darthvaderiana* in the book," Sang told *The Star* after presenting a talk at the Sarawak Biodiversity Centre (SBC) here last weekend.

She said no one was sure how the plant ended up on sale online.

"I'm not saying that people cannot grow begonias – all of them are protected – but it would be a problem if people just take it from the wild and destroy the population, just for easy money."

The book's co-writer Dr Ruth Kiew, who believed Sarawak had the most begonia species in the world, said commercialisation should be done with the permission of local authorities.

The authors estimated that only about half of Sarawak's begonias had been discovered.

An official at SBC, a state government body, said the matter, including commercialisation, would be brought up at the next council meeting.



Mysterious: One of the few pictures available of the Begonia in the wild. – Picture courtesy of *A Guide to Begonias of Borneo* authors.