

News

Toadstool found on stroll is species of the year

Fungus uncovered near Heathrow airport is named Kew Gardens' top discovery in annual list

By Helena Horton

A TOADSTOOL discovered by chance on a walk near Heathrow has been placed at the top of Kew Gardens' list of plant and fungus discoveries of the year.

Each year, scientists publish a list of new species found across the world, usually from remote parts of the rainforest. The UK, being small and much-trampled, is a rare source of previously unknown wild plants or fungi.

But this year, six new fungi were discovered here. Scientists said they do not think such a significant find has been

made in the country for decades. The species are all webcap toadstools, which are ecologically important in supporting the growth of plants, especially trees such as oak, beech, birch and pine. One of these, the *Cortinarius heatherae*, was discovered by field mycologist Andy Overall, who was walking along the boundary of Heathrow Airport. He named it after his wife, Heather. Three other webcap toadstool species were found in Scotland, one in Brighton, and one in Barrow-in-Furness.

Dr Martin Cheek, senior scientist at Kew, said that it was rare to discover so many new fungi in a year, adding: "On average, we probably name one fungus per year so having as many as six in one year is unusual and exciting from a nature lover's view point."

He said that there had not been a new plant discovery in the UK for decades.



The *Cortinarius heatherae* webcap toadstool, which was discovered by Andy Overall

Approximately 156 plants and fungi were found by RBG Kew and its partners in 2020 in Africa, Asia, the Americas and here in the UK.

It is believed that some have the potential to be developed into food or medicine, or even just become new favourites of gardeners. Several on the list are already considered as under threat of extinction from threats to their natural habitats. Scientific work to document these plants is only the first step to ensuring their future conservation.

Dr Cheek said: "In a challenging and difficult year, it's thrilling to see botanical and mycological science continue, with a bumper list of incredible newly named species being documented with our collaborators across the world."

"Among this list are some amazing new finds, each with its own unique qualities and potential for humanity."

New life Kew's top 10 botanical discoveries

- ◆ Six species of webcap toadstool mushroom found in the UK.
- ◆ Shrub discovered in southern Namibia, in the cabbage order, and a new genus and family.
- ◆ New Guinea discovery of 19 tree-dwelling orchids.
- ◆ Two Aloe species in Madagascar,

- which may have medicinal benefits similar to Aloe vera.
- ◆ Orchid found in Madagascar with "rather ugly brown" flowers, according to Kew scientists.
- ◆ Pink morning glory in Peru, prized for its sweet taste, and related to the sweet potato.
- ◆ A bright red and pink

- Brazilian bromeliad on a limestone cliff.
- ◆ A shrub related to blueberry on Mount Jaya in Indonesian New Guinea.
- ◆ Zimbabwe herb being tested for medicinal potential.
- ◆ Red hibiscus in Tanzania which can withstand very dry conditions.

However, the bleak reality cannot be underplayed: with two in five plants threatened with extinction, it is a race against time to find, identify, name and conserve plants before they disappear. We hope this list inspires people to realise the beauty and importance of plants and fungi and support Kew's work to find, document and understand these species so that they can be protected."

Scientists across the globe collaborated to list their top 10 discoveries. Others included "the ugliest orchid in the world", found in Madagascar, which has no colourful petals or leaves. Scientists described it as "brown and rather ugly". Another discovery listed is a pink morning glory found in Peru, which scientists believe could be a new food source related to the sweet potato.

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