

‘Plantdemic’

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The country’s lockdown — into the seventh month now — may have made home-based businesses and hobbies bloom. But they have also spawned new problems, such as unregulated prices, online scams, and, lately, with the popularity of home gardening, plant poaching.

A plant grower has called it a “plantdemic,” a problem that has prompted the Department of Environment and Natural Resources (DENR) to warn plant poachers that they can be charged under the law for gathering wild plants from forests without a permit.

The demand for plants has grown from the succulents and cacti craze three years ago during the minimalism boom, to the obsession with more exotic and rare plants such as the monstera and alocasia varieties during this pandemic. People locked up at home have turned to greenery to ease their boredom and anxiety, fueling a craze that has seen prices going up by as much as 3,000 percent.

For example, as reported in this paper last month, a monstera — a type of houseplant popular among hobbyists — sold for P800 in 2018 but is now selling for as much as P15,000, while an anthurium clarinervium has gone from P500 to P18,000. Per other reports, some potted plants of the rare variety are being sold for as high as P80,000 each.

The plant craze appears to have reached absurd levels: Last month, a photo went viral of a makahiya plant (*Mimosa pudica*, but was falsely tagged as sampinit or Philippine raspberry) in a pretty fuchsia pot being advertised for P2,387, prompting some social media users to quip: “Binubunot lang namin ’yan!”

Some of the plants being sold in the market now were indeed literally uprooted from their natural habitats, in the country's mountains and forests. The DENR memo came from its office in Zamboanga, where some of the country's rare flora and fauna species grow. In its Facebook page, the DENR-Zamboanga exhorted "plantitos" and "plantitas" to "plant responsibly." It said the propagation of plants is welcome as this is in line with the government's vision to create green and eco-friendly communities — but "for as long as it is done legally and in the proper way."

The gathering and trading of wild plants from the forest, especially threatened species, is not allowed under Republic Act No. 9147 or the Wildlife Resources Conservation and Protection Act of 2001. The law, along with RA 7586 as amended by RA 11038 or the Expanded National Integrated Protected Areas System Act of 2018, makes it illegal to remove, possess, trade, or transport wild plants.

Violators found to collect wild plants classified as "critically endangered" can be jailed from six years to 12 years and fined from P100,000 to P1 million. The DENR-Zamboanga posted photos of some of these critically endangered plants, such as the giant staghorn fern, also known as kapa de leon or dapong repolyo (*Platycerium grande*), which is endemic to Mindanao; the smaller staghorn fern (*Platycerium coronarium*); the tiger orchid that is native to the country and is commonly found in Southern Luzon and Eastern Visayas; and the waling-waling (*Vanda sanderiana*), dubbed as the queen of Philippine orchids and treasured by collectors.

Alocasia varieties such as the velvet gabi (*Alocasia micholitziana*) and the zebra plant (*Alocasia zebrina*), found in Luzon's rainforests, are classified as vulnerable, while the kris plant (*Alocasia sanderiana*) is categorized as endangered. Also considered a threatened species is the bantigue (*Pemphis acidula*), which is popular and highly valued among bonsai growers. Some of these plants, particularly the *Alocasia*, are hot items in plant shops and in the social media pages of collectors and influencers.

While home gardening may be seen as a harmless hobby, the collecting and growing of certain plants do have implications on the country's ecology. The DENR-Zamboanga cited ScienceDirect studies indicating that "aside from harboring crop viruses and other

pathogens, wild plants act as important reservoirs and sources of insects, mites, and nematodes.”

In addition, the potential extinction of flowering ornamentals like orchids and hoyas, according to Gawayn Coronel, an agriculture student at the University of the Philippines Los Baños and a member of Youth Advocates for Climate Action Philippines, “can have consequences as they often support pollinator species that can’t live without them.” Pollinators, according to experts, are vital in the production of healthy crops used for food and medicines, and are crucial components of habitats and ecosystems that many wild animals rely on for food and shelter.

So while that rare, exotic plant may be beautifying one’s veranda or living room, uprooting it from its natural habitat likely contributed to the further scarring of the country’s rainforests. Plant hobbyists can help stem the tide by being more aware and responsible, buying only from sellers with legitimate, lawful sources for their plant attractions.

Read more: <https://opinion.inquirer.net/134145/plantdemic#ixzz6aH45Npr>

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