

# MONKEYS POOP 'ROTTEN' FRUIT TREE THAT'S NEW TO SCIENCE

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Fruit and leaves of *Garcinia sibeswarii*, new to science. | Photo Credit: [SPECIAL ARRANGEMENT](#)

Monkeys have pooped a “rotten” but potentially nutrient-rich fruit tree for the world of science to record from Assam.

People in the vicinity of the 900.03-hectare Dulang Reserve Forest in the State’s Lakhimpur district have invariably avoided the *gela thekera* unlike similar sour fruits used in an array of traditional dishes and as chutney or a cooling drink in the summers. *Gela* in Assamese means putrid, spoilt or rotten.

But monkeys relish the bitterish sour wild fruit that humans find repulsive.

An Assam Forest Department officer and three scientists have found that monkeys are key to the propagation and survival of the *gela thekera* they named *Garcinia sibeswarii*, a species new to science.

“The fruit is seldom consumed by the local people. But primates such as the rhesus macaque and the rare Assamese macaque in the reserve forest devour the fruits at maturity,” southern Assam circle’s Chief Conservator of Forest Jatindra Sarma said.

He is one of the authors of the study on *Garcinia sibeswarii*, named after his father Sibeswar Sarma, published in the latest edition of New Zealand-based journal *Phytotaxa*. The other authors are Peerumammed Subaida Shameer and Narayanan Nair Mohanan of Thiruvananthapuram’s Jawaharlal Nehru Tropical Botanic Garden, and Ajima Begum of New Delhi’s National Institute of Plant Genome Research.

“The natural regeneration of *Garcinia sibeswarii* is primarily from the faeces of the primates as the seeds of the fruit the monkeys feast on remain undigested,” Mr. Sarma, who studied the plant during his stint with the Forest Department’s northern Assam circle, told *The Hindu*.

The genus *Garcinia* is represented in India by 44 species and five varieties, all except six species occurring in the wild. The northeast, comprising eight States, hosts 17 of these species, of which two are endemic.

The researchers had during a February trip to Dulang found some 500 *Garcinia sibeswarii* plants ranging from saplings to mid-sized trees. The plant is *dioecious* (having the male and female reproductive organs in separate individuals), evergreen, and grows up to 10 metres in height.

Dulang is a semi-evergreen forest at elevations from 100 to 300 metres above mean sea level.

“This new species is allied to *Garcinia celebica* that is central to Malesia (region straddling the Equator and the boundaries of the Indo-Malayan and Australasian realms). It is a potential candidate for crop improvement programmes of the *Garcinia* species,” Mr. Sarma said.

*Garcinia* is an important source of the anti-obesity phytochemical hydroxy citric acid, kokum butter, oleoresins, essential oils and food colour.

Scientists at a laboratory in Assam have started the scientific validation of *Garcinia sibeswarii* for analysing its properties, including medicinal values.

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