



Nature's Hidden Jewels: Exploring the Untapped Potential of Ornamental Plants in Northeast India

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ABSTRACT

Northeast India is a center of plant diversity. In this area tropical subtropical, temperate and high-altitude ecosystems all live together. The eight states—Arunachal Pradesh, Assam, Manipur, Meghalaya, Mizoram, Nagaland, Sikkim and Tripura—hold a variety of ornamental plants. These include orchids, rhododendrons, begonias, aroids, ginger, lilies, ferns and many flowering trees and shrubs. Some ornamental crops are already grown commercially. Many native and lesser-known plants are still underused. Plants have flowers, leaves, smells, shapes and can adapt to many environments. Earlier surveys showed how rich the orchid collection is in Northeast India. New studies and projects by institutions keep finding plants and new chances, for protection and for making money. The future of these plants does not depend on picking from the wild. Instead a balanced plan that mixes exploration, recording, protection, scientific growing, tissue culture, commercial planting adding value and building markets is needed. This article looks at the wealth of Northeast India. It explains how underused native plants can help flower farming, city gardens, village incomes, new businesses and the protection of biodiversity.

Keywords: *Northeast India, Urban Horticulture, Underutilized Ornamentals, Orchid, Plant Conservation, Nursery Industry; Entrepreneurship*

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1. INTRODUCTION

Imagine walking through the misty forests of Arunachal Pradesh, the hills of Meghalaya, the valleys of Manipur, or the orchid-rich areas of Sikkim. You will find many plants that are quite different from the

common roses, marigolds, and chrysanthemums grown in gardens. Orchids grow on tree branches, foliage plants occur on moist rocks, and colorful flowers appear among the forest vegetation. Many of these plants are naturally suited to shade, high

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humidity, and cool or mountainous conditions. Northeast India is well known for its rich plant diversity. The region has a large number of orchids, rhododendrons, ferns, bamboos, oaks, magnolias, and other ornamental plants. Its varied climate, terrain, and natural habitats provide good opportunities for the cultivation and commercial development of ornamental plants (De & Medhi, 2015). Despite this diversity, only a small number of these plants have become popular in commercial horticulture. Many valuable native ornamentals remain underutilized and are mainly found in their natural habitats or in small collections. The main need, therefore, is to identify these plants, understand their horticultural characteristics, develop suitable propagation methods, and promote their cultivation without putting pressure on natural populations. Proper conservation, scientific propagation, nursery production, and market development can help convert these underutilized plants into valuable horticultural resources while supporting biodiversity and local entrepreneurship.

2. WHAT ARE UNDERUTILIZED ORNAMENTAL PLANTS?

The phrase “underutilized ornamental plants” refers to species that possess attractive horticultural characteristics but have received comparatively little attention in commercial production, breeding, landscaping, nursery development or consumer markets. A plant can be underutilized for many reasons. It may have limited availability of planting material; slow or difficult propagation; insufficient scientific information; restricted natural distribution; limited market awareness; poor post-harvest characteristics; inadequate nursery production technology; or competition from already established ornamental crops. Therefore, underutilized does not mean unimportant. Some of these plants may possess precisely the characteristics that modern consumers are beginning to appreciate—novelty, uniqueness, native identity, unusual foliage, fragrance and ecological value. The modern ornamental plant market is increasingly diverse. Gardeners are no longer interested only in large flowering beds. Indoor plants, foliage plants, terrariums, vertical gardens, balcony gardens, native plant landscapes and specialty nursery plants are gaining attention. This changing consumer behavior creates a new opportunity for Northeast India’s lesser-known ornamental flora.

3. NORTHEAST INDIA: A NATURAL TREASURE HOUSE

Northeast India comprises eight states and encompasses a wide range of natural environments.

From the fertile lowlands of Assam and Tripura to the high-altitude regions of Arunachal Pradesh and Sikkim, variations in temperature, rainfall, altitude, and ecological conditions have created exceptional plant diversity. This rich range of habitats supports numerous ornamental, medicinal, and native plant species, making the region an important center of biodiversity and horticultural potential. The area is especially known for orchids. A past study counted 856 orchid species in Northeast India showing that Northeast India has the biggest share of Indian orchid diversity, at a regional level. More recent literature has reported approximately 973 orchid species from the region, reflecting continuing taxonomic research and expanding knowledge of its orchid flora. Differences between published estimates also demonstrate why plant inventories and taxonomic updating remain important (De & Medhi, 2015). The Botanical Survey of India maintains a National Orchidarium at Shillong containing more than 200 orchid species collected from across Northeast India. Its collection includes representatives of genera such as *Dendrobium*, *Cymbidium*, *Coelogyne*, *Paphiopedilum*, *Rhynchostylis*, *Vanda*, *Phaius* and several others (Botanical Survey of India, 2026).

4. ORCHIDS: THE FLORAL SIGNATURE OF THE NORTHEAST

When discussing ornamental plants of Northeast India, orchids naturally occupy centre stage. Orchids are admired worldwide for their remarkable flower forms, colours, fragrance and long-lasting blooms. In Northeast India, they are not merely ornamental plants; they are part of the region’s ecological, cultural and horticultural identity. Important ornamental genera occurring in the region include *Dendrobium*, *Cymbidium*, *Vanda*, *Rhynchostylis*, *Coelogyne*, *Paphiopedilum*, *Aerides*, *Bulbophyllum*, *Pleione*, *Renanthera*, *Phaius* and *Calanthe*. Several species have also been used as valuable genetic material in orchid improvement programmes (De & Medhi, 2015). The foxtail orchid, *Rhynchostylis retusa*, is particularly attractive because of its long, dense inflorescences carrying numerous small flowers. *Vanda coerulea*, famous for its bluish flowers, and several *Dendrobium* species illustrate the extraordinary ornamental variation present in the region. The Institute of Advanced Study in Science and Technology describes orchids as a major component of Northeast India’s landscape and biodiversity and maintains a living orchid collection in Assam. Its documented collection includes *Dendrobium*, *Cymbidium*, *Paphiopedilum*, *Rhynchostylis retusa* and *Vanda coerulea*, among others (IASST, 2024). The scientific and commercial importance of orchids has also led to the establishment of the ICAR-National

Research Centre for Orchids at Pakyong, Sikkim, whose mandate includes orchid conservation, germplasm characterization, improvement, mass propagation and technology transfer (ICAR, 2022).

5. THE BEAUTY BEYOND ORCHIDS

Although orchids are the most visible ambassadors of Northeast India's ornamental wealth, they are only one chapter of a much larger story. Several other plant groups deserve greater horticultural attention.

5.1 Begonias: Foliage as Art

Begonias are particularly interesting because ornamental value in this group does not depend exclusively on flowers. Leaves may display contrasting colours, attractive venation, unusual shapes, textured surfaces, spots and striking combinations of green, silver, red and purple. This makes begonias highly suitable for shade gardens, containers, terrariums and indoor plant collections. Recent botanical discoveries from Arunachal Pradesh demonstrate that the diversity of begonias in Northeast India is still being documented. The discovery of new taxa also reminds us that we cannot commercialize what we have not yet properly documented.

5.2 Aroids: The New Language of Foliage Gardening

Aroids are a fascinating group of plants that hold great promise for ornamental horticulture. These plants often have eye-catching leaves with striking vein patterns, unusual leaf shapes and growth habits that range from climbing to compact. They thrive in light and humid conditions making them visually appealing and easy to grow indoors. These traits make aroids ideal for indoor landscapes, vertical gardens, green walls and tropical-style garden designs. In Northeast India the opportunity is especially exciting because many native forest-floor plants naturally live under sunlight and high humidity. This means they are already adapted to the environment. Then bringing in exotic species to recreate tropical forests in cities horticulturists could instead focus on using native or regionally adapted foliage plants, like aroids. This approach not supports local biodiversity but also creates more sustainable and resilient green spaces.

5.3 Rhododendrons: Mountains Painted in Colour

Rhododendrons are among the flowering plants that grow in the Himalayan region. When Rhododendrons flower Rhododendrons colourful blooms can transform mountain landscapes into displays. Rhododendrons ornamental value extends to home gardens, parks, botanical gardens, hill resorts, institutional landscapes, nature trails and eco-tourism destinations. The challenge is to identify forms and

species suitable, for cultivation while ensuring that natural populations remain protected.

5.4 Gingers, Lilies, Ferns and Other Hidden Beauties

The ornamental potential of Northeast India reaches beyond just a few plant types. Many plants from the ginger family have flowers or vivid bracts that stand out in any garden. Native lilies bring blooms and unique seasonal changes that add beauty through different times of the year. Ferns offer texture and form making them ideal for shaded areas where other plants might struggle. There are also ornamental grasses, palms, climbing plants, flowering shrubs and trees that could be tested for use in landscaping. Not all of these plants will become popular as cut flowers sold in markets. That is not a problem. Their worth may come from a path—specialty horticulture. A single rare native plant growing well in a container can sometimes be more valuable to a specialist nursery than hundreds of common landscape plants. This shows that the future of gardening is not only about how much you grow. It is also about what you grow. It's about something unique and something, with real value.



Figure 1. Different types of orchids

6. WHY ARE THESE PLANTS STILL UNDERUTILIZED?

If these plants have such attractive features and good horticultural potential, why have they not yet become widely cultivated commercial crops? Several factors contribute to their underutilization. These include limited propagation techniques, inadequate availability of quality planting material, insufficient information on production practices, low market awareness, transportation difficulties, limited breeding and crop improvement efforts, and concerns related to conservation and sustainable collection. Therefore, the underutilization of these plants is not due to a lack of potential alone. It is often the result of a combination of scientific, commercial, logistical, and institutional constraints. Addressing these limitations through research, improved propagation methods, nursery development, market promotion, and conservation-based production can help bring promising native ornamentals into wider cultivation.

7. FROM FOREST BIODIVERSITY TO SUSTAINABLE FLORICULTURE

The transition from wild plant diversity to commercial horticulture must be carefully managed. A plant should not move directly from Forest to Market. Instead, the pathway should be: Forest → Documentation → Conservation → Propagation → Evaluation → Cultivation → Market.

This distinction is extremely important. If a commercially attractive plant is collected excessively from its natural habitat, its economic success could ultimately become a threat to its survival. Research on orchids in Northeast India has identified habitat loss, fragmentation, over-exploitation and other environmental pressures among the factors threatening orchid diversity (De & Medhi, 2015). The answer is therefore not to stop commercialization altogether. The answer is to make commercialization responsible.

8. TISSUE CULTURE: TURNING ONE PLANT INTO THOUSANDS

One of the most promising technologies for underutilized ornamental plants is plant tissue culture. In conventional propagation, multiplication may be slow. A rare orchid or specialty ornamental may produce only a limited number of propagules each year. Micropropagation can dramatically increase multiplication rates under controlled conditions. Potential benefits include rapid multiplication, uniform planting material, disease-free propagation, conservation of valuable genotypes, year-round production, establishment of commercial mother-stock systems and large-scale nursery supply. ICAR–National Research Centre for Orchids has developed

and refined in-vitro propagation approaches for commercial and native orchids and maintains substantial orchid germplasm collections (ICAR, 2022). For underutilized ornamentals, however, tissue culture should not be considered a magic solution. The complete chain must be developed: explant selection, culture establishment, multiplication, rooting, hardening, nursery management, field or landscape performance and market acceptance.

9. THE NURSERY INDUSTRY COULD BECOME THE MISSING LINK

One of the most practical strategies for promoting underutilized ornamentals is the development of specialty nurseries. A nursery could specialize in native orchids, native foliage plants, mountain ornamentals, shade plants or native landscape species. Such specialization can create a clear identity and help consumers understand what makes the plants unique.

10. URBAN HORTICULTURE: A NEW MARKET FOR NATIVE ORNAMENTALS

Cities are becoming increasingly green. Balconies, rooftops, offices, hotels, restaurants, hospitals and educational institutions are incorporating plants into their environments. This provides an opportunity for Northeast Indian ornamentals. Plants with attractive foliage could be marketed for indoor gardens, vertical gardens, green walls, balconies, terrariums, tabletop displays, hanging baskets, shade gardens and resort landscapes. The growing interest in foliage plants is particularly relevant because many native species do not need to compete directly with conventional cut flowers. Their product can be the living plant itself.

11. FROM FLOWERS TO STORIES: THE POWER OF BRANDING

A plant's commercial value depends on more than biology; a plant's commercial value also depends on the plant's story. A regional identity such as "**Ornamentals of Northeast India**" could help connect farmers, nurseries, researchers, conservation institutions, landscape designers, florists, tourism operators, and consumers, while promoting the region's unique ornamental plant diversity and supporting local horticultural enterprises. A plant's commercial value grows when the story is clear and a regional identity such as "Ornamentals of Northeast India" gives a strong sense of place. Branding must however be based on botanical identification and responsible sourcing.

12. VALUE ADDITION: WHEN THE FLOWER LIVES BEYOND THE PLANT

Ornamental plants also offer chances to create value-added products. Flowers and plant parts that have the qualities can be used to make dried floral arrangements, pressed flowers, decorative frames, resin crafts, greeting cards, souvenirs, botanical art preserved floral items and educational kits. ICAR-NRC, for Orchids has pointed out the potential of adding value through orchid-based products and entrepreneurship. This shows that ornamental plants can lead to kinds of products beyond just fresh flowers and live plants.

13. WOMEN AND YOUTH: THE HUMAN DIMENSION

The decorative plant industry can help create jobs of farming. A small business might include things like growing plants putting them in pots taking care of a nursery packing them up taking pictures and selling them online. This opens up chances for people, in rural areas women who want to start their own businesses, groups that help each other and small companies. The size of the work can change too. Someone could start with a covered area a group of plants to use as parents a few hundred small pots and sell everything online and grow bigger as more people want the plants.

14. TOURISM AND ORNAMENTAL PLANTS

Northeast India is also well placed to connect horticulture with tourism. Orchid festivals, botanical gardens orchidarium flower exhibitions, nursery visits and garden tourism can create ways to earn money. The Botanical Survey of India's National Orchidarium at Shillong with a collection of than 200 orchid species, from Northeast India is an example of how living collections can support education, conservation and public appreciation (Botanical Survey of India 2026). A future "Native Ornamental Plant Trail" could bring together biodiversity, horticulture, local culture, traditional knowledge, conservation and tourism.

15. TRADITIONAL KNOWLEDGE: AN OFTEN-OVERLOOKED ASSET

Plants are more than living organisms. Plants are more than biology. Many species have names, traditions, festivals, ceremonies, cultural practices and community knowledge attached to them. This community knowledge can give hints, for species identification for knowing when a species will flower for understanding which habitats a species prefers for learning how locals propagate a species and for setting conservation priorities. Yet traditional knowledge must be protected. Commercial projects should not lead to exploitation or unauthorized use of community knowledge.

16. CONSERVATION THROUGH CULTIVATION

There is a powerful idea at the heart of this subject: a plant can become economically valuable without becoming ecologically endangered. The key is responsible cultivation. Promising plants can be maintained through botanical gardens, conservation nurseries, germplasm repositories, research stations, community nurseries, tissue-culture laboratories and registered commercial nurseries. The ICAR-National Research Centre for Orchids has a specific mandate covering conservation, germplasm evaluation, improvement, propagation and technology transfer (ICAR, 2022). This integrated approach provides a model for other underutilized ornamental groups.

17. MAJOR CHALLENGES AHEAD

Despite its promise, the development of native ornamentals faces several obstacles: taxonomic uncertainty, lack of standardized propagation protocols, limited genetic improvement, lack of production packages, weak supply chains, low consumer awareness and conservation risks. Commercialization must never encourage illegal or excessive collection from natural habitats.

18. A PRACTICAL ROADMAP FOR DEVELOPMENT

- Exploration. Walk through natural areas to find useful ornamental plants.
- Documentation. Write down the species name, where it grows, when it blooms, its home and what makes it a good ornamental plant.
- Conservation. Keep groups safe and set up gardens outside their home when needed.
- Characterization. Check the color, size, scent, leaves, shape and other good features of plants.
- Propagation. Create ways to grow ornamental plants from seeds, cuttings and small lab parts.
- Cultivation. Make simple workable methods for nurseries and growers to grow plants.
- Evaluation. Test how ornamental plants do in different growing places.
- Market Research. Look at what buyers want how much they will pay; how many want them and who might buy them.
- Entrepreneurship. Teach farmers, students, women and young people how to start businesses with plants.
- Branding and Marketing. Create a known brand for ornamental plants, from Northeast Indian ornamentals that are grown responsibly.

19. A SUGGESTED “NORTHEAST NATIVE ORNAMENTALS” MODEL

A future integrated model might work like this: Biodiversity leads to exploration which leads to Taxonomic identification which leads to Conservation which leads to Germplasm collection which leads to Propagation and tissue culture which leads to Nursery production which leads to Commercial cultivation which leads to Value addition which leads to Branding which leads to Domestic and international markets which leads to Revenue for growers which leads to Investment back, into conservation. This creates a horticultural model instead of a one-way extraction system.

20. RESEARCH PRIORITIES FOR THE NEXT DECADE

The next phase of research should move beyond simply documenting plant diversity. Important areas include DNA-based identification and characterization, germplasm conservation, in-vitro propagation, somatic embryogenesis, mutation and conventional breeding, flowering regulation, nutrient management, protected cultivation, post-harvest technology, consumer preference studies, market intelligence, landscape performance, climate resilience, pollinator interactions and value-added product development. Artificial intelligence and digital technologies could also become useful in plant identification, disease diagnosis, phenotyping, inventory management and market forecasting.

21. CLIMATE CHANGE AND THE FUTURE OF NATIVE ORNAMENTALS

Climate change adds another layer of complexity. Plants naturally adapted to particular temperature, rainfall and elevation ranges may experience changes in their suitable habitats. This makes documentation and conservation even more important. At the same time, native plants may provide valuable genetic resources for developing ornamentals adapted to regional environmental conditions. Therefore, conserving underutilized ornamentals is not only about preserving beauty. It is also about preserving genetic options for the future.

22. FROM UNDERUTILIZED TO HIGH-VALUE

The word “underutilized” can sometimes create the impression that a plant has little value. Perhaps the opposite is true. A plant may be underutilized simply because its value has not yet been fully recognized. The ornamental industry shows cases where plants once unknown became popular after breeders, nurseries and consumers discovered their

special qualities. Northeast India has a chance to do the same, with its rich plant resources.

23. THE FUTURE: FROM HIDDEN JEWELS TO HORTICULTURAL ICONS

Imagine a nursery in Arunachal Pradesh that produces ornamentals grown in a scientific way. Imagine a women-led enterprise in Assam that focuses on foliage plants. Imagine an entrepreneur in Meghalaya who sells native shade plants on an online platform. Imagine a garden in Sikkim that blends conservation, research and tourism. Imagine a university that develops tissue-culture methods for a species known only to a few botanists. The foundations already exist: biodiversity, scientific institutions, horticultural expertise, nursery enterprises and a growing interest, from consumers. The next step is to connect foundations.

24. CONCLUSION: BEAUTY WITH RESPONSIBILITY

Northeast India is not a place with lots of different plants. It is a living space where ornamental beauty grows naturally and abundantly. Its orchids have already earned praise across the country and around the world. Beyond these well-known orchids there are many other plants that are less famous but no less beautiful. These plants have flowers, interesting leaves, pleasant smells and unique shapes. They are waiting to be found and appreciated. There is an opportunity here—but it comes with great responsibility. The future should not depend on taking plants from forests and selling them in markets. That would only harm nature. Take away its richness. Instead the future should focus on discovering plants protecting them through science growing them in ways that do not hurt the environment producing them for trade in a responsible way promoting them in creative ways and making sure local communities benefit from their value. The next big ornamental plant may not come from a research lab. It could be growing quietly now – on a tree in the forest near a mountain stream on a rocky slope shaded by trees or even in a traditional garden somewhere in Northeast India. The job of horticulture is to see this beauty clearly learn how these plants grow protect their natural homes and if possible, bring them into cultivation without damaging the wild places they call home. The hidden ornamental plants of Northeast India are more than pretty flowers. They are treasures of life. They carry meaning hold scientific importance support conservation efforts and can help create sustainable jobs for rural communities. So the future of horticulture, in the region may not depend on growing the same old plants again and again. It depends on finding what is truly unique protecting it and giving it the respect it deserves.

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Table.1. Underutilized Ornamental Flowering Plants of Northeast India

Sl. No.	Botanical name	Common name	Ornamental feature	Potential use
1	<i>Rhynchostylis retusa</i>	Foxtail orchid	Dense, fragrant flower spikes	Pot plant, hanging basket
2	<i>Vanda coerulea</i>	Blue Vanda	Blue flowers	Pot plant, specialty orchid
3	<i>Vanda cristata</i>	Crested Vanda	Fragrant, attractive flowers	Pot plant
4	<i>Renanthera imschootiana</i>	Red Renanthera	Brilliant red flowers	Specialty orchid
5	<i>Dendrobium densiflorum</i>	Golden Dendrobium	Dense yellow flower racemes	Pot/display plant
6	<i>Dendrobium farmeri</i>	Farmer's Dendrobium	Pendant flower clusters	Hanging/pot plant
7	<i>Dendrobium chrysotoxum</i>	Golden Bow Dendrobium	Yellow, fragrant flowers	Specialty orchid
8	<i>Dendrobium fimbriatum</i>	Fringed Dendrobium	Large yellow flowers	Pot/display
9	<i>Dendrobium devonianum</i>	Devon's Dendrobium	Pink-purple flowers	Specialty orchid
10	<i>Dendrobium wardianum</i>	Wardian Dendrobium	Large attractive flowers	Collector plant
11	<i>Coelogyne cristata</i>	Crested Coelogyne	White fragrant flowers	Pot plant
12	<i>Coelogyne corymbosa</i>	Coelogyne orchid	White attractive flowers	Specialty orchid
13	<i>Cymbidium elegans</i>	Elegant Cymbidium	Long floral spikes	Pot/cut flower
14	<i>Cymbidium hookerianum</i>	Hooker's Cymbidium	Large flowers and foliage	Specialty pot plant
15	<i>Paphiopedilum venustum</i>	Venus slipper orchid	Unusual slipper-shaped flower	Collector plant

16	<i>Paphiopedilum hirsutissimum</i>	Hairy Paphiopedilum	Large distinctive flowers	Specialty orchid
17	<i>Phaius tankervilleae</i>	Nun's orchid	Large showy flowers	Pot/landscape plant
18	<i>Pleione praecox</i>	Peacock orchid	Attractive seasonal flowers	Pot/rock garden
19	<i>Thunia alba</i>	White Thunia	Elegant white flowers	Pot/display
20	<i>Aerides odorata</i>	Fragrant Aerides	Highly fragrant flowers	Hanging/pot plant
21	<i>Aerides multiflora</i>	Foxtail-like Aerides	Numerous flowers	Specialty orchid
22	<i>Arundina graminifolia</i>	Bamboo orchid	Pink orchid-like flowers	Landscape
23	<i>Calanthe</i> spp.	Calanthe orchids	Attractive terrestrial	Shade garden
24	<i>Bulbophyllum</i> spp.	Bulbophyllum orchids	Unusual flower forms	Specialty collection
25	<i>Pholidota</i> spp.	Necklace orchids	Pendulous inflorescences	Shade/pot plant
26	<i>Liparis</i> spp.	Liparis orchids	Small unusual flowers	Specialty collection
27	<i>Habenaria</i> spp.	Rein orchids	Distinctive flowers	Specialty/conservation garden
28	<i>Goodyera</i> spp.	Jewel orchids	Attractive patterned foliage	Indoor/shade garden
29	<i>Begonia</i> spp.	Begonias	Decorative flowers and foliage	Indoor/shade garden
30	<i>Rhododendron</i> spp.	Rhododendrons	Brilliant seasonal flowers	Landscape/hill garden
31	<i>Lilium mackliniae</i>	Shirui/Siroi lily	Pinkish attractive flowers	Specialty/conservation garden
32	<i>Hedychium</i> spp.	Ginger lilies	Fragrant, showy flowers	Landscape/fragrance garden
33	<i>Curcuma</i> spp.	Ornamental turmeric	Colourful floral bracts	Pot/landscape
34	<i>Alpinia</i> spp.	Shell ginger	Attractive flowers and foliage	Tropical landscape
35	<i>Magnolia</i> spp.	Magnolia	Large fragrant flowers	Landscape/tree ornamental
36	<i>Gardenia</i> spp.	Gardenia	White, highly fragrant flowers	Garden/pot plant
37	<i>Thunbergia</i> spp.	Thunbergia	Attractive climbing flowers	Vertical garden
38	<i>Heliconia</i> spp.	Heliconia	Bright ornamental bracts	Tropical landscape
39	<i>Anthurium</i> spp.	Anthurium	Colourful spathes	Indoor/cut flower
40	Native aroid spp.	Native aroids	Distinctive foliage and flowers	Indoor/vertical garden