



THE MYSTICAL NEELAKURINJI: BLUE FLOWER OF THE MOUNTAINS

Logeshwaran Kandasamy¹, Shakila Sadasivam^{2*} and Mohamed Rizwan T I¹

¹PG Scholar, ²Assistant Professor, Department of Floriculture and Landscape Architecture, SRM College of Agricultural Sciences, Chengalpattu.

*Corresponding Author Mail ID: shakilas@srmist.edu.in

Neelakurinji is botanically known as *Strobilanthes kunthiana*, belonging to the family Acanthaceae, and is native to Tropical Asia and Madagascar. It is a purple-blue flowering shrub that blooms once every twelve years. It is commonly found in India's Western Ghats and Nilgiris. Named 'Neelakurinji' in Tamil—where 'neela' means blue and 'kurinji' refers to the flower itself—this botanical wonder transforms entire hillsides into breathtaking carpets of purplish-blue blooms, creating an otherworldly landscape that captivates all who witness it. There are over 250 species in the genus, of which 46 are native to India. Many of these species have odd flowering patterns, ranging from yearly to 16-year cycles. The plant reaches a height of 30-60 cm and grows at an altitude of 1,300-2,400 meters. The Nilgiri Mountains, located in Tamil Nadu, were named after the flower, meaning "blue mountain".

Neelakurinji is recognised as one of the most intriguing genera due to its gregarious, infrequent blooming. It is a tropical shrub that grows along the edges of moist deciduous forests, on slopes, and in ravines at elevations ranging from 1300 to 2400 metres above sea level. It is unique to India's Western Ghats (Karnataka, Kerala, and Tamil Nadu). It is predominantly found in the Anamalai and Agali hills of Kerala in the Western Ghats, and the Shevroys Hills in the Eastern Ghats. The genus *Strobilanthes* has more than 450 species, of which 72 are indigenous to the Western Ghats. Over 40% of the variations found in *Strobilanthes* are diversified in different parts of India.

Flowers of Neelakurinji

The flowering cycle of the tree varies from three to sixteen years, depending on the species, with the majority being perennial.

Neelakurinji needs 12 years to grow, bloom completely and is classified as a Plietesiads.



Strobilanthes kunthiana plant and inflorescence

These plants have gregarious flowering behaviour and can generate seeds synchronously for long periods, a process known as masting. Several species of neelakurinji flower in different seasons and colours, while neelakurinji is the most popular and widely utilised. Flowers bloom around 9 a.m., last for two days, and wilt on the third day with no odour. While the blue blooms are rich in nectar, they are adored and pollinated by honey bees and butterflies. The unique honey of this plant has a shelf life of over 15 years and is collected from Neelakurinji blooms, which are known as "Kurinji then."

SPECIES OF STROBILANTHES



Strobilanthes kunthianus



Strobilanthes gracilis



Strobilanthes urceolaris



Strobilanthes amabilis



Strobilanthes heyneanus



Strobilanthes sessilis



Strobilanthes zenkerianus



Strobilanthes consanguineus



Strobilanthes ciliatus



Strobilanthes pulneyensis

Plant characteristics of Strobilanthes

Habit	Bushy shrub, 0.75-2 m high, with strong, gregarious branches, glabrous, erect, rigid, and quadrangular. Nodes are conspicuous and sparsely lenticellate, with a light purplish tinge, and angular or quadrangular upward. Stems can be glabrous or sparsely pubescent, with pubescence limited to grooves and nodes. Lenticels and leaf scars are present.
Leaves	Elliptic-ovate leaves with an acute base, crenate-serrate edge, and short acuminate apex. They are coriaceous and scabrid above, and white-villous between veins beneath. The petiole is 0-5.4 mm long, symmetrical, and has stout, tapering hairs along the margins. The abaxial surface is coated in a white farinose indumentum, while the adaxial

	surface is glabrous or sparsely covered with tapering hairs.
Bract	Bracts are 1-1.5 cm long, elliptic-ovate, white, villous, and the midrib is not visible.
Bracteole	Lanceolate, 10 mm long, shorter than the calyx, with floccose margins and middles, and no visible midrib.
Calyx	Lobes 10-14mm long, split roughly half from the base, floccose-villous, and linear-lanceolate.
Corolla	The corolla is 2-3 cm long, campanulate, and pale blue, lilac, or mauve. The nerves are darker, pubescent outside, at the nectar guide area. There are 5 orbicular or suborbicular lobes with an undulating upper edge.
Androecium	Staminal filaments are pilose and hispid, without grooves.
Gynoecium	Ovary hairy at the apex, style 15mm long.

Pollen	Ellipsoidal, 60-86 × 40-53 µm, 3-zonoporate pseudocolpi 5 in each mesocolpium, with ridges 2.19 µm wide.
Fruits	Capsules 1-2 cm long, broadly ellipsoid; seeds 4, 1.5-2 mm in diameter, orbicular, brownish, flattened

The wonder flower *S. kunthiana* is mainly grown in the Western Ghats. Despite having a wealth of medicinal properties, this amazing plant can be used to adorn the garden with its blue colour. Neelakurinji's synchronised blooming has yet to be discovered. As a result, there may be numerous options for future research. According to the most recent IUCN global assessment, it is considered threatened and falls into the Vulnerable (Criteria A2c) group. Hence, conservation of these endangered species is needed now.

Reference

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