

Large Bellflowers with buckshorn flowering on the Peaks. Photo credit: Rebecca Cairns-Wicks



St Helena
Government



A WHITE CHRISTMAS ON ST HELENA

St Helena's highest peaks aren't at a high enough altitude for snow to fall, but this December there's a splash of white on the high ridge near Diana's Peak at a scale that hasn't been seen for centuries.

This Christmas take a walk up to Diana's Peak and when walking along the central ridge, between Diana's Peak and Cuckold's Point, look out for the newly planted bank of Large Bellflowers on the Sandy Bay side of the path. It is an incredible sight and you will be one of very few people in the world to experience it. These plants are extremely fragile so do look, take photos, enjoy and celebrate their rescue from extinction, but please do not touch.

The Large Bellflower is one of the Island's rarest endemic plants found only in very small isolated populations across the Peaks on steep ledges and cliffs. It is threatened with extinction due to competition with invasive plants, landslips and hybridisation. The Large Bellflower hybridises with the Small Bellflower and hybrids are found naturally in a few locations where the two species are growing close enough together for pollen transfer to take place.

After years of effort, the Large Bellflower is being successfully reintroduced to a couple of sites across the Peaks National Park. Focused conservation effort is realising exciting results and starting to bring the species back from the brink of extinction. Seed and cuttings were collected from as many of the different pure plants as possible and these were grown together in one place to create a living gene bank. By bringing as much of the potential genetic variation that exists in the species together in one place, cross fertilisation and outbreeding can occur.

The seed from these plants were collected, germinated and the seedlings planted back in the wild. This new generation of Bellflowers should have a better chance of being strong and healthy because of the greater potential for genetic variation within the population as a whole. This is important as it can increase the population's resilience to potentially catastrophic threats such as pests and diseases and climate change. Tiny self-regenerated seedlings have been spotted at one planting site and this marks another exciting new chapter in the recovery effort.

Congratulations are extended to all EMD Nursery and field staff on the Peaks (past and present) who have contributed to this incredible success story. Keep up the good work. Genetic research on the Large and Small Bellflower is expected to be carried out in 2022 under the UK Government funded St Helena Cloud Forest Project. We are most grateful to the Darwin Initiative for funding to support this work to date, and to the UK Government for funding the Cloud Forest Project that will enable us to upscale restoration activities moving forward.

SHG
21 December 2021

SHG Press Office | 1st Floor, The Castle | Jamestown | Tel: +290 22470

kerisha.yon@sainthelena.gov.sh | julie.george@sainthelena.gov.sh | jodie.s-constantine@sainthelena.gov.sh

