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World's smallest water lily comes from Rwanda to your window sill

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The horticultural possibilities of a mug on a window ledge used to be limited to mustard and cress. But now miniature water lilies could bloom there.

The world's smallest water lily almost became extinct in the wild two years ago, but the botanist who pulled it back from the brink now hopes that the "window sill water lily" will become the next houseplant craze.

"You can grow it in a coffee mug," said Carlos Magdalena, a senior horticulturalist at the Royal Botanic Gardens, Kew. "It makes an excellent houseplant." The plant, whose pads measure as little as 1cm across, is less than a tenth of the size of the next smallest water lily. It is also known as the "thermal water lily" because it grew only on the muddy edges of a hot spring in Mashyuza, Rwanda.

It disappeared from the site two years ago, however, when local farmers used the spring water for agriculture. Although a German scientist saved a few specimens, no one could work out how to grow the plants from seed.

Mr Magdalena, who was sent some samples from Bonn, repeatedly failed to get the seeds to germinate and was down to his last 20 seeds. Meanwhile, one of the last two plants in Germany was eaten by a rat.

He solved the problem after a student translated the German description of the water lily's natural habitat. "All the species of water lilies, and there are about 50, start life deep in the water, so everyone was trying that. Then I came across the description — they didn't come from a river or lake — so I thought they may need CO₂ from the air."

Mr Magdalena placed seeds and seedlings in pots of loam, inside containers of warm water, keeping the water at the same level as the top of the soil. There are now 20 plants and dozens of seedlings growing at Kew. The next step will be to attempt to reintroduce the water lily to the wild.

“People are already asking me where they can buy it,” Mr Magdalena said. “It is easy to maintain — you just need a sunny location and to keep it damp. It’s even easier than a houseplant because you can’t overwater it.”

By crossing the thermal lily with other lily species, he hopes to produce different coloured flowers and leaves.

Though the Rwandan Government will have to give permission before the plant can be sold, Mr Magdalena already has a market in mind: “I think the Japanese will go crazy for it. They like lilies and they like bonsai.”

The water lily will go on show at Kew on Saturday to mark International Day for Biological Diversity. Professor Stephen Hopper, director of the Royal Botanic Gardens, said that such projects were of more than horticultural importance. “Biodiversity is fundamental to existence.”