

# Fairy lanterns were thought extinct. Then a botanist found one in 2021.

By Erin Blakemore March 4, 2023 Washington Post



The *Thysanotus kobensis*, nicknamed the "fairy lantern" because it looks like a tiny lantern illuminated on the dark forest floor. (Kenji Suetsugu)

If you've never heard of the delicate plants known as fairy lanterns, you're not alone: They're so rare that many species of them are considered extinct. But news that Japanese researchers have rediscovered a species thought to be lost forever could ignite new interest in the diminutive, colorful plants that look like they're lit from within.

[Writing](#) in the journal *Phytotaxa*, researchers relay how they found proof that *Thismia kobensis*, a type of fairy lantern plant first discovered in Kobe, Japan, still exists.

A single specimen of the tiny plant had been spotted in the city in 1992, but after the site was destroyed to make way for an industrial complex in 1999, the plant was thought to have been killed off.

But in June 2021, a botanist spotted a fairy lantern on a nature trail in a forest north of the industrial facility, the researchers write. A search yielded three specimens — enough for researchers to analyze its flowers, gather DNA from a dried part of one of the plants and more thoroughly describe the species.

The hairy flower has a clear, glossy bottom and a yellow-orange tube that contains its stamens. Like other *Thismia*, it draws its energy not from the sun but from decaying organic matter in dirt. The organisms, known as saprophytes, are usually found in tropical areas.

The researchers believe the similarity between the Kobe flower and one spotted on a prairie near Chicago more than 100 years ago could indicate that the two are related. They speculate that migration over the land bridge between Asia and North America might explain the connection.

The find is a win for botanists, but researchers warn that the plants remain critically endangered and are threatened by foot traffic along the nature trail. Meanwhile, the hunt for *Thismia americana*, the fairy lantern last spotted in Chicago in 1916, continues. Some botanists are “confident it's still out there, thriving incognito in remnant prairies,” [according to Chicago's Field Museum](#). To learn more about the elusive plant, visit [bit.ly/Thismia](http://bit.ly/Thismia).