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Rhodope Juniper – a new plant species in Bulgaria

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The Rhodope elika (*Sideritis elica Aneva*, *Zhelev & Bonchev*) is the new species that has been discovered and described by Assoc. Prof. Ina Aneva (Scientific Secretary of the Biodiversity, Bioresources and Ecology Division and researcher at the Institute of Biodiversity and Ecosystem Research, BAS), Prof. Petar Zhelev (University of Forestry) and Chief Assist. Prof. Dr. Georgi Bonchev (Institute of Plant Physiology and Genetics, BAS).

Sideritis elica (Rhodope elika) differs morphologically from the well-known Mursal tea (*Sideritis scardica*), and the differences have been confirmed at the molecular level through the application of genetic analyses. The most essential morphological characteristics that distinguish the new species are related to the mode of branching of the stem, the width and length of the first three pairs of leaves, the length of the bract tip, and the

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high intensity of pubescence. The species is part of section *Empedoclia* of the genus *Sideritis*, which is a taxonomically complex group including 47 species distributed in the Eastern Mediterranean. The phylogenetic analysis shows clear differences between the studied taxa and 6.8% genetic divergence between them.

Sideritis elica grows in the Red Wall Biosphere Reserve, Western Rhodopes. The population has a low number of individuals, which necessitates the implementation of measures for the conservation of the species in the wild. The locality covers the upper part of a rocky slope, which in its flattened ridge part passes into a mixed forest of black pine and European hop-hornbeam.



For countries that are well studied in terms of their flora, such as Bulgaria, the discovery of new plant species is a relatively rare event.

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The species is named in honor of Assoc. Prof. Ina Aneva's mother – Elka, as a recognition of her botanical enthusiasm, support and inspiring assistance during all studies.

Source: Institute of Biodiversity and Ecosystem Research, BAS

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