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INQUIRER SOUTHERN LUZON

# Inquirer Southern Luzon : Puerto Princesa celebrates with a misunderstood flower

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PUERTO PRINCESA CITY – Puerto Princesa City has pulled off a tourism coup in officially recognizing an otherwise obscure orchid-like flower, drawing throngs of local and foreign visitors to the Palawan capital for other reasons than its pristine surroundings.

On the first week of March coinciding with the city's founding anniversary, activities were organized around the "balayong" tree or Palawan cherry, a medium-sized shrub that sprouts pink and white-colored blooms akin to Japan's cherry tree or sakura blossoms during the first quarter.

The "Balayong Festival" became a hit as the highlight of the city government's successful planting campaign that saw hundreds of trees planted along roads, bright with colorful flowers. The planting program encouraged officials to adopt an ordinance enshrining the festival in the official tourism calendar.

But drowned out in the euphoria of festivities is a misunderstood fact that, according to a prominent Filipino biologist, the Palawan cherry is neither a cherry nor a species endemic to Palawan. Botanist Leonard Co of the Conservation International describes the plant (*Cassia nodosa*) as an introduced species from Java in Indonesia.

"The name Palawan cherry is a misnomer," said Co, who added that the shrub is a legume belonging to the Fabaceae family.

Around 500 seedlings were prepared for this year's version of the festival.

According to city tourism officer Boots Mohammad, tourist arrivals have rapidly peaked over the last three years and the availability of hotel rooms has become a serious concern.

"Around this time of the celebrations, it has become very difficult for tourists to book hotel accommodations and we think that one of the reasons for the increase in traffic is this week-long activities," Mohammad said.

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