Treasure-hunting took on a new meaning when botanist Hugh Tan and his team went to Lazarus Island to look for highly-threatened plants. He is spearheading a project to propagate such species on the mainland of Singapore.

GREEN TEAM

It could be the Bill Gates of plants

A group of botanists visited Lazarus Island recently. Not to play, but to save threatened and useful species of plants from becoming extinct here.

**By LEA WEE**

IT WAS a treasure hunt like no other for the group of botanists which descended recently on Lazarus Island, an uninhabited speck off Singapore.

To reach some of their “treasures,” they had to balance themselves precariously on ladders, or make their way among rocks.

The team of five, led by Associate Professor Hugh Tan from the National University of Singapore, were hunting for highly-threatened plants.

He is spearheading a project to propagate such species here. “In this way, should calamity befall the plant, there is backup material to keep the species going in Singapore,” he says.

And there is no time to lose. Termites on the island are nibbling through the wood of the Lingga podocarpus tree, leaving a dark, ominous trail along its branches.

This tree from the chilli family is the only one left in Singapore, says Prof Tan.

“Species should not be allowed to become extinct. Who knows? It may turn out to be the Bill Gates of Tom Cruise of the species and contain some useful genes which may code for a whole range of useful qualities or products.”

To propagate the species, the botanists used a “low-tech” technique called air-layering, which, they feel, has a higher chance of success than stem cuttings.

This involves peeling off a ring of bark from the branch, packing a growing medium around it to form a nodule and then wrapping it in a polythene sheet.

The two ends of the sheet are tied with string, so that it looks like an oversized wrapped sweet. To prevent the sun from overheating the medium, a piece of aluminium foil is wrapped around it.

He and his team hope that when they return to the island in two to three months, the roots would have grown.

Then, they can cut off the branch and plant it in a pot in the garden of the NUS Department of Biological Sciences.

As the sun made its way up in the sky that day, the team trekked along the beach of the island. An hour later, they had一笔ised a total of 25 branches from six trees.

But it was not all work. Along the way, there was time to enjoy other “treasures” which have long been lost from the beaches of mainland Singapore.

The island, a former British colony, is now closed to the public for security reasons. The team had to get a permit to go there.

Prof Tan pointed out Neem tree, famous among Indians for its medicinal properties, but it was the Tom Ali tree that drew the team’s attention — its roots can be used as an aphrodisiac.

Hermit crabs living in shells of dead seaweeds trolled the beach.

Also found, barely alive, were two freshwater tortoises probably dehydrated. They swam across the chart separating Lazarus from Singapore, but some were released by devotees.

The team brought them back to the mainland and released them into a pond.