

**AFTER OVER A CENTURY OF ABSTINENCE, *FICUS ELASTICA*
REDISCOVERS SEX IN SINGAPORE**

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Ficus elastica is otherwise known as the India Rubber tree. It was an important source of latex in the 18th and early 19th centuries. However, its importance to latex production was eclipsed by *Hevea brasiliensis*, particularly after the development of *Hevea* plantations in Asia in the late 19th century. Nonetheless, *F. elastica* remains a common ornamental plant. Historical cultivation for latex assisted the spread of *F. elastica* throughout tropical Asia and its provenience has remained a mystery. Moreover, its propagation through cuttings led to the development of asexual varieties and even those that did flower were never pollinated. Given the absence of any evidence of natural regeneration, E.J.H. Corner, the renowned tropical botanist and *Ficus* expert who worked at the Singapore Botanical Gardens from 1926 to 1946 and led many botanical expeditions around the region, concluded that *F. elastica* was extinct in the wild. Based on morphological similarity to other species, he also suggested that it might have originated from NE India. Around 2005, wild seedlings of *F. elastica* began appearing in Singapore and a quick investigation revealed it was being pollinated. The pollinator turned out to be *Platyscapa clavigera*, which was originally described from *F. elastica* in Bogor in 1885 but named *Pleistodontes clavigera* Mayr (Hymenoptera: Chalcidoidea: Agaoninae). A visit to Bogor Botanical Gardens in 2012 revealed that not only was *F. elastica* being pollinated by *P. clavigera*, but that there were strong indications that it had been reproducing naturally in the gardens for a long time. We suggest that *F. elastica* probably originated from Java, but despite being introduced to Singapore around 200 years previously only recently did its pollinator manage to colonise. There are over 50 species of *Ficus* in Singapore, including several closely related species. So this tale not only illuminates a fascinating piece of botanical lore, but illustrates the extraordinary specificity of this fig – fig pollinator interaction. In addition, through showing that *F. elastica* individuals, which can probably live several centuries, are capable of waiting for their pollinator over a period of many years, it demonstrates one way in which a highly specific interaction can be extremely stable.