

NEWS AND AWARDS

Young Asian Mycologist 2017 - Sajeewa S.N. Maharachchikumbura (Sajee)

At this very outset, we wish to state with pleasure that Sajee is the recipient of the Asian Mycological Association Young Mycologist Award (2017). The AMC Executive Committee had intended for the award last October (AMC 2017) at the AMC in Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam and Sajee will receive his award in AMC 2019 at Mie, Japan in October 2019. We also congratulate Sajee for being placed on Clarivate Analytics' Highly Cited Researchers list 2018. This list recognizes world-class researchers selected for their exceptional research performance, demonstrated by the production of multiple highly cited papers that rank in the top 1% by citations for field and year in Web of Science.

Sajee is a best known young mycologist in Asia for his significant taxonomic contributions is on Sordariomycetes and Pestalotiopsis-like taxa. He has worked on collecting, identification, classification, molecular systematics and diversity of fungi. At present, he authored over 110 scientific publications support for many of the Asian fungi. According to Google Scholar his publications have been cited over 5500 times (h-index = 27). Twenty-seven of his papers (five as a first author) published in the top journal (Q1) in the field of Mycology. In his studies, he has introduced two new subclasses, six new orders and sixteen new families, thirteen new genera and 80 new species to the science. He has also had a hand as Editor in Chief, Handling Editor, Senior Associate Editor and Associate Editor in scholarly journals- Plant pathology & Quarantine (PPQ), Phytotaxa, Fungal Diversity, Mycosphere, Asian Journal of Mycology, Studies in Fungi and Current Research in Environmental & Applied Mycology (CREAM).



Sajee in his office at Oman



Sajee and his PhD supervisor Prof. Kevin Hyde

He majored in Botany at the University of Peradeniya, Sri Lanka between 2005 and 2009, and published his first paper at the graduate school on “Occurrence of leaf blotch disease (*Botryosphaeria* sp.) in *Ficus religiosa* (Bodhi tree) in Sri Lanka” in Ceylon Journal of Biological Sciences. In 2009, Sajee graduated with honors and was sent to work in the National Herbarium of Sri Lanka in Royal Botanical Garden of Peradeniya. Though he was there only for a short period of time, he gathered a vast knowledge about plant identification, herbarium management and curation which was significantly useful for his late research career.

Shortly after in 2010, Sajee went on to earn a doctorate in mycology at Mae Fah Luang University in Thailand under the direction and guidance of Prof. Kevin Hyde. He started his taxonomic studies of the speciose and poorly understood chemically creative genus *Pestalotiopsis* both at the inter- as well as the intraspecific level. During his PhD, he awarded the visiting scholar from Institute of Microbiology Chinese Academy of Sciences (IMCAS) (2010 - 2011) and the Westerdijk Fungal Biodiversity Institute, Netherlands (2012 - 2013). During his time in IMCAS, due to his enthusiasm and dedication, he earned the Outstanding Graduate Student award. Sajee assessed suitability of the fungi molecular markers for resolving species in *Pestalotiopsis*; and he introduced two new genera; *Neopestalotiopsis* and *Pseudopestalotiopsis* with 59 novel species and provides a backbone tree for 70 ex-type/epitypified species which can be, used in future studies. With his knowledge of *Pestalotiopsis*, Sajee made contributions to the DNA Barcoding consortium, where they standardize ITS region as the universal barcode for fungi.

Soon after finished his doctorate Sajee accepted an appointment as a postdoctoral fellow at the Center of Excellence in Fungal Research, Chiang Rai, Thailand. There he evidently gained a taste for the higher level taxonomy of fungi. He has been leading molecular phylogeny research and successfully applied molecular tools coupled with classical taxonomy to determine phylogenetic relationships among different groups of fungi, especially which are belong to the class Sordariomycetes. He and his co-authors reviewed 107 families of this second largest class of Ascomycetes by observing type or representative taxa of each family and provided a list of accepted genera and keys, an updated outline and a backbone tree for the class.

He was hired in 2015 by Guizhou Academy of Agricultural Sciences as a postdoctoral fellow where he developed a particular interest in the collection and identification of plant pathogen in the south China karst region. Fieldwork was Sajee’s passion and he loves to see fungi in the natural environment. He continuously sampled in Chongqing, Guangxi, Guizhou, and Yunnan provinces in China and collected numerous fungal isolates, identified several novel pathogens with new diseases records.



Sajee looking for fungi in southern China

Presently he is a postdoctoral fellow at the Department of Crop Sciences, College of Agriculture and Marine Sciences at Sultan Qaboos University in Oman. He focuses his research on the fungal diversity and geographic distribution of taxa, in the poorly sampled desert habitats. So in this situation, their research focused on collecting and developing a culture collection for the fungi in desert habitats. He curated the newly established culture collection houses over 3500 fungal strains isolated from different areas in Oman. Another aspect of their research is finding an answer to how the microbial diversity changes in the rhizosphere upon different farming systems. He and his team have been using genetic, genomic and bioinformatic approaches to understand the beneficial soil microbial community and how they vary with the different farming techniques, abiotic conditions and plant communities. They also carry out research on the etiology and management of diseases of cucurbits, date palms and crops of economic importance in dry and subtropical areas.

Sajee is also a caring teacher, co-supervising M.Sc and Ph.D Project Students in Crop-Sciences and mentoring dozens of mycology students in China and Thailand. He also is a Visiting Professor at the Center of Excellence in Fungal Research, Thailand. He has been involved in the development of phylogeny and systematic workshop for the international participant organized by the Mushroom Research Centre, Thailand.

We are sure that his research will be of great value to the scientific community and emerging graduates of the future generation. We take this opportunity to wish him all success in all his ventures.