



A worker at the Bin Salman farm tosses freshly picked Damascena (Damask) roses in the air, used to produce rose water and oil, in the western Saudi city of Taif. — AFP photos



A worker at the Bin Salman farm sits amidst freshly picked Damascena (Damask) roses.



A worker at the Bin Salman farm tosses freshly picked Damascena (Damask) roses in the air, used to produce rose water and oil.



A worker at the Bin Salman farm, checks bottles as they fill with rose water from distillers.



A worker at the Bin Salman farm picks Damascena (Damask) roses.



A worker at the Bin Salman farm, fills a distiller with freshly picked Damascena (Damask) roses.



A worker at the Bin Salman farm, fills a vial with rose oil in the western Saudi city of Taif.

Saudi Arabia's city of roses blooms in Ramadan

Every spring, roses bloom in the western Saudi city of Taif, turning pockets of the kingdom's vast desert landscape a vivid and fragrant pink. In April, they are harvested for the essential oil used to cleanse the outer walls of the sacred Kaaba, the cubic structure in the holy city of Makkah towards which Muslims around the world pray. This year, the harvest falls during the holy fasting month of Ramadan, which observant Muslims devote to prayer and reflection.

Workers at the Bin Salman farm tend rose bushes and pick tens of thousands of flowers each day to

produce rose water and oil, also prized components in the cosmetic and culinary industries. The perfumed oil has become popular among the millions of Muslims who visit the kingdom every year for pilgrimages. Patterns of plants and flowers have long been part of Islamic art. Known as the city of roses, with approximately 300 million blooms every year, Taif has more than 800 flower farms, many of which have opened their doors to visitors. While workers pick flowers in the fields, others labor in sheds, filling and weighing baskets by hand. The flowers are then boiled and distilled.

"We start boiling the roses on high heat until they are almost evaporated, and this takes around 30 to 35 minutes," Khalaf Al-Tuweiri, who owns the Bin Salman farm, told AFP. "After that we lower the heat for around 15 to 30 minutes until the distilling process starts, which lasts for eight hours." Once the oil floats to the top of the glass jars, the extraction process begins. The oil is then extracted with a large syringe to fill different-sized vials, the smallest going for 400 Saudi riyals (\$106). — AFP

'Narcocat' intercepted with drug delivery for Panama prison

Authorities in Panama on Friday intercepted an unlikely smuggler, a fluffy white cat, bearing an assortment of drugs in a pouch tied to its body as it tried to enter a prison. The feline felon was stopped outside the Nueva Esperanza jail, which houses more than 1,700 prisoners, in the Caribbean province of Colon, north of the capital Panama City.



Handout picture shows an assortment of drugs seized in a pouch tied to a cat as it tried to enter a prison in Colon, Panama. — AFP photos

"The animal had a cloth tied around its neck" that contained wrapped packages of white powder, leaves and "vegetable matter", according to Andres Gutierrez, head of the Panama Penitentiary System. They were likely cocaine, crack and marihuana, according to another official. This is not the first such attempted critter crime. Prisoners use food to lure animals to them, once the creatures had been loaded with drugs by people on the outside.

The office of the drugs prosecutor of Colon said on Twitter it had opened an investigation into the use of animals for smuggling illegal substances into the Nueva Esperanza Prison. It posted photographs of the drugs, and of the cat caught in the act. The animal will be taken to a pet adoption center, according to prosecutor Eduardo Rodriguez. Panama has some 18,000 inmates in 23 prisons, most of them overcrowded. On previous occasions, authorities have intercepted attempted drug deliveries using homing pigeons and even drones. — AFP



Handout picture released by Panama's Prosecutor Office, shows a white cat bearing an assortment of drugs in a pouch tied to its body as it tried to enter a prison in Colon.



This handout photo shows coast guard personnel inspecting seized giant clam shells. — AFP

Giant clam shells worth \$24.8 million seized in Philippine raid

Philippine authorities said yesterday they have seized some 200 tons of illegally harvested giant clam shells worth nearly \$25 million in one of the biggest known operations of its kind in the country. Conservationists have expressed alarm over the surging illicit trade in the endangered creatures, which are used as a substitute for ivory following a global crackdown in the trade of elephant tusks. The Philippines is home to most of the world's giant tropical clam species, and Friday's raid took place in the western province of Palawan, considered a poaching hotbed.

The coastguard said four suspects were arrested on the remote Green Island in the Sulu Sea that turned up the largest ever giant clam shell haul by law enforcers in the area. "Taking the giant clams from their natural habitat is a form of inter-generational crime," Jovic Fabello, spokesman for the

Palawan Council for Sustainable Development told AFP. "It will permanently affect the marine ecosystem and future generations will be deprived of the benefits accruing from it," he added.

He said the seized shells included those of the *Tridacna gigas*, the world's largest clam. Growing up to 1.3 meters (4.5 feet) wide and weighing up to 250 kilograms (550 pounds), these host marine algae which are a basic food source for many of the fish species consumed by humans. Conservationists say giant clam shells are used as an alternative material for products ranging from earrings to chandeliers as ivory becomes scarce. Fabello said the illegal trade in giant clams has been growing in Palawan and several other areas of the Philippines in the past three years.

Killing endangered species is punishable by up to 12 years in prison and fines of up to a million pesos under the country's wildlife protection act. "These people are digging up giant clams and killing them," Fabello alleged. The coast guard estimated the value of the latest haul at 1.2 billion pesos (\$24.8 million). It dwarfed the previous Palawan record of 80 tons of giant clam shells worth \$3.3 million that were seized early last month from Johnson Island, also near the venue of Friday's raid. — AFP