

# Flora exotica

## *the allure of orchids*

High summer is the time to go hunting for Britain's strangest and most beautiful flowers, says **Susanne Masters**

**I** was always barefoot when I went to look for bee orchids in the lawn. Their slender spikes of flowers seemed too vulnerable to risk trampling them with shoes. Twenty years later, I am still looking for orchids, but now I wear stout footwear – there are scorpions, snakes, rocks and viciously thorned shrubs where I am working in Turkey.

When I think about these beautiful flowers, though, it is still with the same feeling of anticipation from those summer mornings in East Anglia, before anyone else was awake; wondering if I would find them and if the buds would be open. Orchids have held a lifelong attraction to me – and I'm not alone.

### Floral aphrodisiacs

Throughout history, orchids have been regarded as floral royalty. Celebrated for their showy beauty and strange, sensual blooms, they have always been among the

most sought-after flowers. Curiously, they take their name after the Greek word *orchis*, which means 'testicle', because many of the European orchids – the first group of orchids to enter our naming system – have two tubers, which resemble male sexual organs. As a result, orchids have been used as an aphrodisiac in both Europe and the Middle East for thousands of years.

On a more rational level, orchids' widespread appeal may have something to do with their generous ratio of colourful blooms to leaves. Some don't even make leaves, so their flowers stand out more than those of other plants. Also, their flowers can be bright combinations of shades and patterns rarely seen in nature, making them a natural treasure.

Orchid hunting was – and can still be – a dangerous pursuit. Hunters in the 1800s and early 1900s went to the tropics armed with cutlasses and pistols to defend themselves from the natives, but usually »



**Susanne Masters** is an ethnobotanist working on a PhD on wild orchid harvesting in Turkey





**BEE ORCHID** (*Ophrys apifera*)

Each flower looks like a bumblebee wearing an extravagant pink hat. A generalist that grows in open grassland from pristine downland to domestic lawns, it flowers from June to July.



» perished from tropical diseases such as yellow fever. In 2000, adventurous British horticulturalist Tom Hart Dyke tried to cross the Darien Gap – a break in the connection between North and South America due to its impenetrable jungle, swamps and guerrilla activities – because he wanted to find a new orchid to name after his granny. He was captured by FARC revolutionary guerillas in Columbia and held for nine months.

You don't need to risk all in pursuit of such rare beauty, however. I believe that the 56 British species (of 25,000 worldwide) are enchanting enough that you need risk only a short rail journey and a walk to spot something really special.

### Tough survivors

Many of our orchids have curiously shaped flowers, which have evolved to attract specific pollinators. Some resemble insects (the most obvious being the bee orchid). To our eyes, the flowers of the monkey orchid look like little pink primates

dangling from the stalk, while the flowers of the man orchid resemble small green human figures.

Perhaps the most captivating aspect of orchids is that, because of a bizarre lifecycle, they have proved resistant to domestication; so, more than any other group of plants, they are considered wildflowers. However, the places where orchids tend to grow are often heavily influenced by human activity.

Orchids have minute seeds suited to long-distance travel on the slightest breeze. These seeds contain no carbohydrates; instead, they rely on certain species of fungi to provide the energy required for their germination and initial growth.

When growing conditions are unfavourable, orchids can remain dormant, sustained by their fungal partners until conditions improve. This means that these

apparently delicate plants are often ready and quick to colonise newly exposed ground, or they reappear when habitats change to their advantage. For example, when the Channel Tunnel was opened,

huge heaps of excavated soil were deposited on the English side at Samphire Hoe – and these were soon smothered in thousands of early-spider orchids, normally a very rare species.

Shakespeare's reference to 'long purples' in *Hamlet* is usually thought to mean the early-purple orchids that grow in woodland or grassland.

These habitats were created hundreds or thousands of years earlier by human management of the landscape. Forest clearances created grassland, and regular grazing by cattle or sheep gives the wild orchids a chance to survive among more vigorous grasses. Coppicing by foresters keeps the balance of light and »

**“Orchids have proved resistant to domestication, so they are considered wildflowers”**

## A guide to Britain's most striking orchids



**LADY'S-SLIPPER** (*Cypripedium Calceolus*)

Proved too attractive for collectors, so only one secret colony of native plants remains. A re-introduction programme is running in northern England, and visitors are welcomed to some sites. Flowers in May and June.



**LESSER BUTTERFLY ORCHID**  
(*Plantanthera bifolia*)

This orchid has a wide range, although it is more common in the north. Woodland populations are best viewed in May and June while heathland lesser butterflies flower in June and July.



**COMMON TWAYBLADE** (*Neottia ovata*)

Green flowers are accompanied by just a pair of leaves. They grow throughout the UK – in the south of England they will have finished flowering by June, but in Scotland they can still be spotted blooming in August.



**COMMON FRAGRANT ORCHID**  
(*Gymnadenia conopsea*)

Flowers are usually pink but occasionally white, and give off a strong sugary sweet fragrance. It grows on chalk and limestone grassland and flowers from May to July.



**BIRDS-NEST ORCHID** (*Neottia nidus-avis*)

Growing in the gloom of Beechwoods, these are largely found in the south of England. Birds-nest orchids produce no leaves; they are completely dependent on fungi for nutrients. Their beige flowers bloom in May and June.



**EARLY MARSH ORCHID** (*Dactylorhiza incarnata*)

The most wide-spread of the marsh orchids has five sub-species, which are distinctively coloured from salmon-pink incarnata to varying hues of red coccinea and creamy-white ochroleuca. Flowering times vary from May to July.





**EARLY PURPLE ORCHID** (*Orchis mascula*)

Eye-catching dark pink-purple flowers are matched by spotted leaves. It grows on a range of habitats with neutral or alkaline soils. Flowers from April to early June, but can be seen in March in the south, or as late as July in Scotland.



**MARSH HELLEBORINE** (*Epipactis palustris*)

White and purple marsh helleborine flowers stand out in their marshy habitats. Requiring neutral or alkaline water, they are typically found in dune slacks or spring-fed fens. Look out for their flowers from June to August.



**COMMON SPOTTED ORCHID**

(*Dactylorhiza fuchsii*)

The UK's most common orchid grows in a range of habitats from grassland to marshes and woodland. Both leaves and the flowers have dark spots. It flowers from May to August.



**LINDISFARNE HELLEBORINE** (*Epipactis sancta*)

Entirely limited to the Holy Island of Lindisfarne in Northumberland, this is one of the UK's endemic species. It has green and white flowers, which can be seen in June and July. If you make the trip, 11 species of orchids grow here.



**BURNT ORCHID** (*Orchis ustulata*)

Look for the lowest petal, which resembles a tiny human figure. Found on ancient chalk grassland in the south and riverside pastures in the north. The early form flowers appear May and June and the late form from June to August.



**AUTUMN LADY'S-TRESSES** (*Spiranthes spiralis*)

Tiny spirals of white flowers sprout from short, dry turf (try sea cliffs and churchyards). Flowering in August its coconut scent is more noticeable at dusk. It is restricted to the south but other lady's-tresses are more abundant in the north.



**LIZARD ORCHID** (*Himantoglossum hircinum*)

This striking species grows almost hip high, and the long twisted lower petal quivers in a breeze, making the plant seem on the verge of movement. Found on grassland on a few sites in southern England; flowers in June and July.





Seek out the stunning marsh helleborine in wetlands and fens between June and August

» shade in a woodland, which encourages the flowers to thrive.

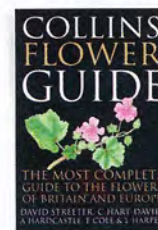
Human activity also created the place that showed me orchids are not fragile exotic plants clinging to existence in our cool climate. Ainsdale Sand Dunes, in Merseyside, were disturbed by sand extraction and asparagus cultivation, then conserved with sand-trapping fences and the planting of marram grass. Marsh helleborines, a rare and flamboyant variety of orchid, bloom in such profusion here that you cannot see the trees for the flowers: creeping willow is swamped by them.

### Happy hunting

Some orchids are even taking advantage of derelict industrial sites, such as the former waste tip, now site of special scientific interest, at Nob End near Manchester.

High alkalinity caused by industrial waste creates conditions that are inhospitable to other plants, giving an abundance of orchids the opportunity to grow with minimal competition.

So, good luck with your orchid-spotting. But don't be tempted to take them home, it is illegal, and wild orchids are likely to die away from their habitat. For me, a big part of the excitement is in finding these spectacular plants, and seeing them in the varied landscapes they choose as home. **CF**



### Collins Flower Guide

Our story uses illustrations from this Collins guide written by David Streeter, covering 1900 species. Available from £19 hardback, £11 softback.

## top 10 orchid sites to visit

### 1 AINSDALE SAND DUNES

Lancashire

Marsh helleborines and many other orchids species grow in the dune slacks and under the pine trees. Early in the morning, flowers gleam with dew and summer dusks are scented by evening primroses. It is accessible by public transport; just 20 minutes' walk from the nearest train station. The dunes are open access from Southport to Formby, information on what is flowering is displayed in Ainsdale beach car park.

### 2 NOAR HILL

Near Selborne, Hampshire

With a wide range of species you can visit from April to August and see orchids flowering. The first to flower are the early-purple orchids and the last are autumn lady's-tresses.

### 3 BADBURY RINGS

Dorset

This iron-age hill fort is managed with grazing cattle and sheep to keep the scrub down so that the orchids thrive. Walk around the rings of the fort and keep your eyes open for orchids.

### 4 BONSAI BANK

North of Sole Street, Kent

A walk through the woods will take you to the area marked as Bonsai Bank. Flower-rich glades support a range of insect life from butterflies to glow worms.

### 5. WITTON LIME BEDS

North east of Northwich, Cheshire

Chemical residues from industry created this site of scientific interest. It is one of the few places where both northern and southern marsh orchids grow, so you can also see their hybrid blooming here.

### 6 SANDSCALE HAWES

Cumbria

Look in the dune slacks for thousands of coralroot orchids. You'll also be treated to the sight of other orchids and views of the estuary and Lakeland Mountains. You'll be facing west, so sunsets are long and spectacular.

### 7 KENFIG DUNES

Glamorgan

The best site to see fen orchids, but also contains many other orchid species. You can ring the information centre to check flowering times. T. 01656 743386

### 8 BALRANALD

Outer Hebrides

Traditional land management creates the Hebridean machair (grassy plain) that is carpeted in flowers including marsh orchids.

### 9 BEINN EIGHE AND TORRIDON

Highlands

Between Loch Torrin and Loch Maree you can enjoy mountain scenery and particularly Scottish



plants among the Caledonian pinewood. Among them, you can see creeping lady's-tresses.

### 10 WHISBY NATURE PARK

Lincolnshire

With thousands of southern marsh orchids in the Orchid Glade, it would be hard not to see orchids here if you visit during flowering season, in June and July.

### Check before you trek

Orchids bloom just once a year, and flowering times are strongly influenced by the weather. In general, they flower earlier in the south and later in the north. Check species flowering times in a botanical guide and consult with local nature wardens to make sure you're not disappointed.

