

In search of orchids



A few years ago, I noticed an unusual plant in my garden wild patch. At first, I thought the spike of pale pink flowers was a late Ladies Smock but on looking closer I realised it was a Common Spotted Orchid. It came back the next year, and the one after that and has continued to thrive in my garden. This year there are three rosettes of the characteristic spotted leaves and I look forward to the flowers in June.

Humans have long been fascinated by orchids. The underground tubers of some species have a characteristic shape, hence the name *orchis*, which is Greek for testicle. The Greek physician Dioscorides, writing in AD 65, recommended orchid roots as a conception aid, and witches in Shakespeare's time were said to use orchid roots in love potions. With a myriad of flower shapes, patterns and colours, often closely related to a specific insect pollinator, no other plant family has captured our imagination in the way that orchids have.

Sadly, this fascination has led to many orchids being overharvested in the wild, to the extent that all orchid species are now protected by the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species (CITES). All orchids, whether large commercial shipments or small quantities of plants for private collections require CITES permits for transport between countries.

Globally, there are more than 26,000 different orchid species, 95% of them tropical. The UK has some 50 – 60 native species of orchid; David Lang's 'Wild Orchids of Sussex' describes the 33 species found in Sussex.

So where are the best places to see orchids in and around Plumpton and East Chiltington? Look out for Early Purple Orchids from early April onwards in Great Home Wood, amongst the bluebells in the Plantation and beside the footpath through the beech woodland leading up towards Black Cap on the north scarp of the downs. A solitary Green Winged Orchid sometimes appears in All Saints churchyard, but better to head a few miles north to All Saints Church, Danehill where you'll find hundreds in a range of colours from dark purple to pale pink and even white, all with the characteristic green striped 'hood'.

The Common Spotted Orchids at All Saints churchyard are at their best in mid-June. This species is also frequent on the downs. Also common in the chalk grassland on the downs are the bright pink 'lollipops' of Pyramidal Orchids and the slender, fragrant stems of Chalk Fragrant Orchids. The Plumpton Cross is a good place to see all three of these orchid species. I've also found the occasional Common Twayblade in this location but the largest group I've seen, some 50-60, is beside the footpath through the narrow strip of woodland at the top of Streat Bostal. The Common Twayblade may not be as colourful as other orchids but its flowers are charming, resembling little green men.

Another species of Fragrant Orchid, the Marsh or Dense-Flowered Fragrant Orchid, can be seen in late June/early July on the north slopes below Ditchling Beacon. Taller, and more sweetly-scented than the Chalk Fragrant orchid, the Ditchling plants are one of the largest Sussex populations of this species, and are well-worth seeing.

The Bee Orchid, perhaps the most recognisable of British orchids, resembles a plump brown bumble bee diving into a pink flower. Many orchid species have evolved insect mimicry as a pollination strategy. Male insects attempt to mate with the orchid flowers and in doing so transfer pollen between individuals. Despite looking like a bumble bee, Bee Orchids are actually self-pollinated. The best place to see Bee Orchids locally is a not-so-secret private location near the sand pits.

Southern Marsh Orchids are known from a private meadow in East Chiltington; the hybrid between Common Spotted and Southern Marsh Orchids can be spotted on the Wildlife Verge on Novington Lane near Warningore Farm. The hybrid is noticeably taller than the parent species.

In late summer, just when you could think that the orchids were over for another year, it is time to search for the sombre coloured flowers of the Violet Helleborine and the Broad-leaved Helleborine. Both are difficult to see in the gloomy late summer woods but they grow in some of our parish woodlands and are always lovely to find.

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