

Wild Orchids in Winter

As soon as the snow melts away, it's possible to spot some local botanical gems—wild native orchids. They're not in flower yet—for that you will have to wait until late summer. But to see the delightful winter leaves of Downy Rattlesnake Plantain and Crane Fly orchids, February is a perfect time to go searching.

Warning: both species are minimalists in the leaf department and that makes them rather inconspicuous and perhaps a hunt for the most diligent. The Crane Fly orchid's entire winter foliage is a single, papery leaf, green on top and beet-red below, with a few purple splotches on the upper surface to tip off an alert plant

slleuth. Downy Rattlesnake Plantain leaves are also diminutive but more plentiful. They win my vote as the most elegant leaves of any native plant, a visual triumph in variegated design. Because they are evergreen, you can find Rattlesnake Plantain leaves all year round, whereas the Crane Fly leaf disappears by early Spring.


Orchids are often thought of as the classic plant of rainforests, and indeed, the Amazon and Borneo are festooned with them. An astounding and little appreciated fact: there may be 26,000 species of orchids, making them the largest plant family on Earth. Put another way, about one of every 20 plant species known to science is an orchid. Most are epiphytic, meaning they grow on trees; but many are terrestrial and pop out of the ground from the Arctic region down to the tip of South America. They can occupy habitats as

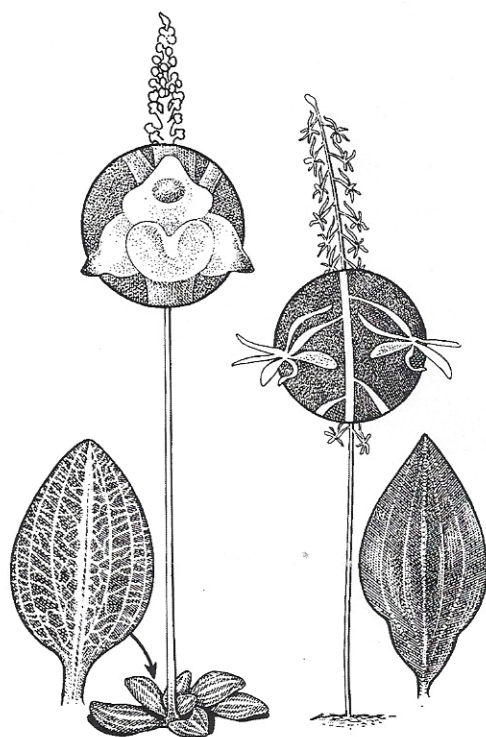
diverse as deserts and salt-water swamps. In the D.C. area, a local checklist records 48 species of orchids—all of which are terrestrial. The two most common are the ones pictured here.

The best way to find this pair is to look for large beech trees on rocky north-facing slopes with abundant moss (Downy Rattlesnake Plantain typically grow in the moss and Crane Fly orchids favor the foot of giant beeches). It's likely that the Crane Fly orchid and American beech trees have an intimate liaison—most orchids rely on fungi to help gain food resources, and some of these fungi draw nutrients from neighboring tree roots. Without the fungi, the orchids won't grow, so if you come across a Crane fly orchid, don't dig it up for transplanting unless you plan on taking the adult beech tree and the surrounding soil home with you.

Forty-eight species of orchids in our backyard sounds like botanical wealth, but for comparison, consider the orchid flora of Mt. Kinabalu, a 13,000-foot-tall mountain of granite on the island of Borneo, the highest peak between the high mountains of New Guinea and the Himalayas. On a visit more than a decade ago, I found many orchids on its slopes, but I was amazed to learn that more than 1,000 orchid species have been recorded there, the highest concentration of orchids anywhere in the world.

Orchids may seem exotic, but they are part of our everyday lives, or at least our baking recipes. One orchid extract yields the most expensive spice or flavoring in the world after saffron—vanilla. *Vanilla planifolia* is a climbing orchid native to Mexico but now widely grown in the tropics, especially in Madagascar and Indonesia. Only in Mexico does the native bee, a member of the *Melipona* genus, do its pollination work on our behalf. Elsewhere, the plants must be hand-pollinated—the reason why the extract is so costly.

I can't direct you to a wild vanilla orchid without a plane ticket to Veracruz. But for those who want a detailed treasure map to go winter orchid searching, perfect for those feeling cooped up, contact me at rhinosahib@gmail.com and I'll tell you where to find them. —



*Downy Rattlesnake Orchid (left)
and Crane Fly Orchid (right).*