

ORCHID

Family: *Orchidaceae*

Botanical Name: *Orchis*

Common Name: Orchid

Like many plants the orchid has quite an extraordinary history filled with Lust, Greed and Wealth. The Aztecs who drank the vanilla mixed with chocolate prized the most famous orchid, the vanilla orchid. The name “vanilla” is derived from the Spanish *vainilla* for the shape of the seedpod, or vanilla bean. Vanilla has the same root as “vagina.” Westerners did not appreciate orchids at first: “our Privateers.... have often thrown (vanilla) away when they took any, wondering why the Spaniards should lay up Tobacco stems,” wrote the pirate and botanist William Dampier, who was the darling of London society when not capturing ships and killing their crews. But by 1753, Linnaeus recommended vanilla as an aphrodisiac in his book *Materia Medica*, which listed some sixty-nine species of orchid.



Orchid's name is Greek *orchis* (testicle.) The tubers of Mediterranean orchids look like paired testicles of differing sizes, the smaller storing the previous year's food. The cattleya orchid was named for William Cattley in 1818. He received it as packing around other plants. After it flowered, it died and wasn't found again for many years. At a ball in Paris an orchid fancier noticed one in the cleavage of a South American ambassadoress. He learned that it came from Brazil. The cattleya lives up to the lascivious reputation in Marcel Proust's *Swann's Way*, when Swann offers to fasten one “a little more securely” in “the cleft of (Odette's) low-necked bodice,” He then suggests he should “brush off” the pollen fallen from it, and the rest follows.

Other orchids are called “ladies' fingers” or “ladies' tresses,” or “long purples.” The paphiopedilum orchids are named for Paphos, the site of a temple on Cyprus where Aphrodite was worshipped and prostitutes were available, for a *pedilon* (a slipper.) Orchids are, even in their names, closely connected with the power that “geveth lust unto the workes of generacyon and multiplycacyon of sperma” (Hieronymous Braunschweig, *Book of Distillation*.)

The sexual behavior of orchids has confounded botanists since they first began to be studied. To germinate, their seeds need to be penetrated by fungus threads. Orchids go to extremes to propagate themselves, just as those who worked to get them went to extremes to show off their wealth and power.

In the nineteenth century orchids were collected by the ton. Once, four thousand trees were cut down for the orchids growing on them. One collector alone was said to have sent one hundred thousand orchids to England, and yes, many died. Wilhelm Micholitz



sent home an orchid growing in a human skull, which was auctioned for a huge sum complete with container.

Orchid hunters mostly searched for riches rather than knowledge of the amazing plant world. Nobody seemed to care that huge areas were stripped of native orchids, and we cannot feel sorry for their collectors who met with trouble. Even now, orchids are more often corsages for the rich

than comfort for those who live in poor places and could enjoy their beauty in the native habitat. Their beauty, although undeniable, is not the beauty of simplicity.

100 Flowers and How They Got Their Names

by: Diana Wells