

## Plants of Uncommon Beauty

by

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Southeastern Manitoba is home to a number of rare plant species. The most outstanding of these are our two endangered orchid species, the Western Prairie Fringed Orchid (*Platanthera praeclara*) and the Small White Lady's-slipper (*Cypripedium candidum*). Both of these plants can be found in the Tall Grass Prairie Preserve near Tolstoi, Manitoba, along with the provincially rare Great Plains Ladies Tresses (*Spiranthes magnicamporum*).

The Western Prairie Fringed Orchid is tall and striking. Its many shining-white blossoms have deeply fringed lips and are scented at night to attract the night the night-flying moth, which is the pollinator. I have noticed that many white flowers are strongly scented. Perhaps this is an alternate way to attract a pollinator instead of using colour. This orchid usually blooms in early to mid-July.

The Small White Lady's-slipper is a delicate plant. The little white flowers are so translucent you can see the purple veins in the slipper. These Lady's-slippers bloom in June.



Small white lady's-slipper. Photo: Eugene Reimer.

The Great Plains Ladies Tresses is a small plant and you have to look closely to see the braided ranks of white blossoms hidden in the grass. Their frilly lip is sometimes tinged with yellow and their sweet fragrance wafted on the wind will sometimes lead you to a clump of these plants. They bloom in August and September.



Great Plains ladies'-tresses. Photo: Doris Ames.

Another beautiful fringed orchid, the Small Purple Fringed Orchid (*Platanthera psycodes*), can be found growing on Buffalo Point on Lake of the Woods. It blooms mid to late July. Because it can be found blooming there and nowhere else in the province, it is important that we protect it. There are not many plants and they do not appear to be spreading. It is important that it be protected from picking, digging and repeated mowing before it sets seed.

Another rare plant family with white flowers comes to mind, the White Waterlilies (*Nymphaea*). Many of us have seen the rare Fragrant Water Lily (*Nymphaea odorata*) with its many large, delicately scented flowers and large leaves, but you may not know that there are two species of small white water lilies. One of these, the Pygmy Water Lily (*Nymphaea tetragona*) is rare and blooms in late July to mid-August. According to Cathy Foster from the Manitoba Conservation Data Centre, the petals form a square where they meet the stem. The other white one, the Dwarf Water Lily (*Nymphaea leibergii*), does not have this feature and we have noticed it

blooms a few weeks earlier than the Pygmy Water Lily, although there can be some overlap in the blooming times. Both these species have small white flowers with 9-15 petals. In this area, they can often be found growing in deep ditches or in placid stretches of the rivers, often accompanied by the yellow Small Pond Lily (*Nuphar microphyllum*). The best-known location for the Fragrant Water Lily is the Lily Pond in the Whiteshell Provincial Park.

One of the prettiest rare plants I have seen is the New England Aster (*Aster novae-Anglia*). It can be found growing in the Tall Grass Prairie Preserve, around the Steinbach and Zhoda areas and occasionally in the Sandilands Forest Reserve. It blooms in August, and its handsome many-petalled flowers can be either a deep violet or rose pink. It prefers to grow in tall grass prairie or meadows with wet spots.



New England aster. Photo: Eugene Reimer.

We are very lucky to have these plants in the southeast but their numbers are getting smaller each year. Because we often see them, we tend to forget that they are not common elsewhere and they need our protection. Please do not pick or dig up rare plants. Picking may seem harmless but it prevents the plant from producing seeds and it often involves removing some leaves. Leaves are used by the plant to manufacture and store energy by the process of photosynthesis. Without this energy, the plant cannot make flowers and seeds or survive our harsh winters.

Repeated picking will kill most wild plants. Repeated mowing is as harmful as repeated picking. Mowing of ditches and other areas that are known to contain rare plants should be postponed until they have bloomed and formed their seed pods. While it is tempting to transplant wild plants into our gardens, it is rarely successful long term. This is because rare plants need very specific growing conditions. This is why they are rare. You can buy lab-propagated plants or seeds from nurseries if you want to grow rare plants. Many species including some native orchids are available now.

We need to remember that wild plants are an important part of the ecosystem and need to be there to keep it intact. They are also a part of the natural legacy of this province and should be preserved for future generations to enjoy.

If you know of any locations where these or other rare wild plants are growing, please notify the Manitoba Conservation Data Centre at 945-7760.