

Ophelia's orchid

Maureen Young

King How now, sweet queen!
Queen One woe doth tread upon another's heel,
So fast they follow: your sister's drown'd,
Laertes.
Laertes Drown'd! O, where?
Queen There is a willow grows aslant a brook,
That shows his hoar leaves in the glassy
stream;
There with fantastic garlands did she
come
Of crow-flowers, nettles, daisies, and
long purples
That liberal shepherds give a grosser name,
But our cold maids do dead men's fingers call
them:
There, on the pendent boughs her coronet
weeds
Clambering to hang, an envious sliver broke;
When down her weedy trophies and herself
Fell in the weeping brook.

Hamlet IV. 7.171

On attending a North Shore 'Shakespeare in the Park' performance of *Hamlet*, my botanical ear caught Gertrude's mention of "long purples" and "dead men's fingers", and this led to my searching for a plant that was so called. At first I thought it might be a reference to foxgloves (*Digitalis purpurea*), as the description is appropriate and 'dead man's bells', an old name for foxgloves (Hutchinson 1955), almost fits the bill. However, the glossary of my copy of *The Works of William Shakespeare* (Clark & Wright 1953) gives "purples - the purple orchis, *Orchis mascula*".

Orchis mascula, the early purple orchid, is common and widespread across Europe (including, providentially, Denmark), Russia, northwest Africa and the Middle East, and it grows in meadows, mountain pastures and woods. In English woods it flowers from mid-April to mid-June. It is a tuberous terrestrial orchid with stems 30-90 cm in height with many erect leaves and cylindrical spikes of six to twenty purple flowers (Fig. 1).

'*Orchis*', of course, means 'testicle' because of the paired fleshy subterranean tubers. Grinding these tubers produces a flour called salep or salamisri, or variations of those words, and it contains a nutritious starch-like polysaccharide, glucomannan (Wikipedia). Before being supplanted by coffee it was sold from stalls in the streets of London. An early Greek physician claimed that married couples used the tubers to determine the sex of an unborn child. When the man ate the larger tuber they would have a boy; if the woman ate the smaller tuber, they would have a girl (Allimuthu & Walter). It is still used to this day as a tonic, an aphrodisiac and a special diet for geriatrics. This would be one way of spicing up old age!

The tubers, creamy-grey in colour, also give rise to the name of 'dead men's fingers'. Along with 'long purples', the two common names could well apply to several of the purple-flowered species of this large genus, but in view of "liberal shepherds giving them a grosser name" *Orchis mascula* has a double whammy, as '*mascula*' means 'male' or 'virile'. We will have to use our imagination to conjure up the grosser name used by shepherds; it could just have been a lewd description of the tubers, but in view of its use as a sexual tonic which "provokes lust exceedingly" (Allimuthu & Walter), the rough yokels would probably have come up with a good descriptive epigram.



Fig. 1 *Orchis mascula*, Ullapool, Scotland. Photo: E Cameron, 7 Jun 2011.

While travelling with Alison Wesley and Anne Fraser in June 2011 to Spain and Ireland we were especially interested in the orchids that grew intermingled with the glorious wildflowers of those regions. We recorded 17 species of orchid, including *O. mascula*,

in the limestone mountains of northern Spain, and it was one of the eight orchids that we saw on the limestone terraces of the Burren in Ireland.

It seems that crow-flowers are members of the Ranunculaceae, and a few different buttercups have 'crowfoot' as part of the common name; *Ranunculus acris* as meadow crowfoot, *R. hederaceus* as ivy-leaved crowfoot and *R. lenormandii* as water crowfoot (Hutchinson 1955).

References

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Allimuthu, M.; Walter, T.M. *The role of salamisri (*Orchis mascula*) in geriatric care*. URL: www.openmed.nic.in/3072/01/salamisri-full.pdf (accessed 28 Feb 2013).

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A Variation on *Simpliglottis cornuta* at Awhitu District, Auckland

Tricia Aspin

On 30 September 2012, while orienteering in the pines of Waiuku Forest, I noticed colonies of the ground orchid *Simpliglottis cornuta*. Interested in taking a closer look, I returned, after the run, with Cara Lisa Schloots, a fellow orienteer and student who has chosen to study native orchids in the Mt William Reserve near Bombay for her Duke of Edinburgh award. Cara Lisa had noted that some specimens were sporting twin flowers and some had three leaves. We examined the colonies in the vicinity and found that all had one or more twin-flowered individuals among them.

This forest block was originally planted in *Pinus radiata* in 1939 and was logged and replanted in 1975/76 (Auckland Conservancy). Now under these nearing-forty-year-old trees is a lush understorey of ferns, mainly *Asplenium oblongifolium* with occasional *A. polyodon*, *Microsorium pustulatum*, *Pellaea rotundifolia* and *Pteris tremula*. Scattered among the ferns are numerous colonies of *S. cornuta* and on the lower slope some *Microtis unifolia* as well. Nearby blocks were checked but found to have no *S. cornuta* and unlike those blocks cattle have been excluded from this one during this rotation of pines.

We returned on 10 October, accompanied by Eric Scanlen and Stella Christoffersen, anticipating the flowers to be more fully open and were well rewarded. Walking through a greater area of the

block many more colonies were noted and again most sported a twin-flowering plant. I counted 15 twin-flowered specimens in bud at the time. Something had eaten off many of the mature flowers. Snail shells, possum scat and evidence of rabbits were noted. Rats are another possibility. A twin-flowered specimen was collected (AK 334858). Most of the mature flowers were eaten off when Eric visited again on 20 October and by 28 October, when he took another look with Pam Shearer, only the mature flowers under cover of sticks or ferns were not nibbled off.

I haven't heard of twin-flowered specimens in *S. cornuta* and it strikes me as unusual to have around 1% of the population twin-flowered, as opposed to the normal single-flowered form. Occasional three-leaved plants have been reported elsewhere but here some 10% are three-leaved. The so-called third leaf was smaller than those of the usual twin-leaved plants. The twin-flowered plants sported a large floral bract on the prime flower like a half-sized third leaf but the secondary flower had just the usual small, clasping floral bract (Figs. 1 & 2). One of Eric's observations was that some of the single-flowered plants had an additional and large floral bract *ahead* of the flower as though waiting for the prime flower to emerge. We noted that all calli were mid-brown and none of the usual specimens with green calli could be found (Fig. 3). More observations are