

THE END OF THE ORCHID SEASON

By Stephen Oakes-Monger

Recording Now, Issue 18 – July 2023

We have eighteen species of wild orchid on the island. The season begins in April with the Early Spider and Early Purple Orchids and ends in August with the Helleborines and September with Autumn Ladies-tresses. Towards the end of August, on the Lawns of the Isle of Wight an inconspicuous species of orchid appears for just a few weeks, heralding the end of the summer.

Autumn Ladies-tresses (*Spiranthes spiralis*) is the last of Britain's 56 species of wild orchid to come into flower in the year, their thin pale green stems begin to appear from around the third week of August on garden lawns, grass verges, public recreation grounds, churches and cemeteries and on chalk downland.

By the beginning of September, three to twenty delicate white bell like orchid flowers appear from the middle of the stem upwards in a spiral resembling a ringlet, hence the name Ladies-tresses. When viewed close up through a hand lens the flowers and stems are covered in fine downy hairs giving them a charm all of their own.

The plants tiny stature (3-15cms) and small flowers mean that they are easily overlooked. In the last 6 years my partner and I have found the orchid on around 400 front lawns on the Isle of Wight, although virtually none of the residents were aware that they had them and so they frequently succumb to the lawn mower.

In 2020 wet weather in the middle of August meant that lots of residents on the island cut their lawns at the end of the month, so many of the lawns where the orchids were abundant in previous years, were sadly lacking this lovely species. However, plants still survive even after they have been cut, and they will come up again the following year.

(Right) Autumn Ladies-tresses flowering in grassland by Stephen Oakes-Monger



The flowers have a delicate sweet honey-vanilla scent, though smelling them involves getting very low to the ground and carefully cupping the flower spike in the hand to appreciate its aroma.

Autumn Ladies-tresses is found throughout the island, where the right habitats occur and although relatively common, it is almost certainly overlooked. As all orchid species in Britain are protected, it is against the law to pick them or dig them up without the permission of the owner of the land on which they are growing and they should be left for others to enjoy.



The dainty flowers of Autumn Ladies-tresses by Stephen Oakes-Monger

Individual plants are very long lived and may flower for many years and there may well be large numbers of dormant non-flowering plants on lawns which are cut too regularly. Plants that have been cut off, often increase in size vegetatively year by year until they are able to flower. A cutting regime of last cut in the first week of August would allow the plants to flower and increase, while a further cut in late October would allow the orchids to set seed and colonies to expand further.

On the island I have seen the species on lawns in Alverstone, Apse Heath, Bembridge, Binstead, Bonchurch, Brading, Carisbrooke, Colwell, Cowes, Fishbourne, Freshwater, Gurnard, Lake, Newbridge, Newport, Northwood, Norton, Ryde, Sandown, Seaview, Shanklin, Totland Ventnor, Winford, Wootton and Yaverland. Indeed, it used to grow on the grassy roundabout at Alum Bay where the buses turn round, until it was replaced with a concrete one. It is clear that it could crop up almost anywhere especially on the chalk, so keep an eye out as you may well be lucky enough to have this delightful species on your lawn.