

Idaho Native Plant Society – White Pine Chapter

Native Plants, #5, 2007

Calypso bulbosa

Common names: fairyslipper, Calypso orchid, Venus's slipper

If you are walking through a cool, dark stand of pines and / or Douglas fir on Kamiak Butte or Moscow Mountain and you spy a spot of purple or pink in the duff, you are probably one of the fortunate to see *Calypso bulbosa*. This species of orchid is reportedly named for a nymph in Homer's Odyssey who captivated Ulysses on his return to Ithaca. The orchid is reported to have been named by Linnaeus as *Cypripedium bulbosum* in 1783 and was renamed later by Oakes.

The ovate or egg-shaped leaf is solitary and appears in late summer. It remains through the winter and dries up in summer after the flower blooms in May or early June. The single stem and flower arise from a bulbous corm. The lip or slipper is an enlarged petal. The two petals and three sepals are lance-like and turn upward. There is a typical orchid hood. It is pollinated by insects and bumblebees which are attracted to it but which do not receive any nectar from it. Small corms are said to grow on the large corm thus eventually forming a colony. The orchid seed is simple and extremely numerous.



Variations: This species appears with some variation in most of the western states, the northern tier of U. S. states, as well as across Canada, Alaska and northern Europe. Although it can be locally numerous, it is threatened or endangered in many places because of habitat disturbance (logging, overgrowth and development), breakdown of its symbiotic microbial relationship, and difficult propagation requirements. Some have reported that because of its need for cool soils, global warming may introduce another threat.

Use in the landscape: Due to the very specialized soil requirements, woodland conditions and the microbial symbiotic relationship, this plant is not recommended for any landscape use except the woodland gardens in which it is found growing as a native. Any damage from foot traffic, over watering, or fertilizing will likely destroy the plant or make the habitat unsuitable.

Availability: Seed is available on at least one site on the web. Corms were not listed as available on any sites I looked at.

Pests: According to several sources, animals from moose to mice, as well as slugs will eat some portion of this plant. I have not seen evidence of *Calypso bulbosa* on our property having been chewed on but will look more carefully in future.

Edibility: Although it is reported in the literature that this orchid is edible and was both eaten and used medicinally by Native Americans, it should be protected now due to the fact that its localities are reduced in number and its habitat often disturbed.

Propagation: Propagation by seed, by corm separation, and by transplanting are listed on the web, but most seem to be speculation as to what might work, not tried and true methods. The germination period for seed may be as long as a year and a half.

Native Plants should not be dug from the wild. Please purchase from reputable dealers.

Numerous sites about *Calypso bulbosa* can be found on the web by typing the plant name in a search engine such as Google. It is also written up in most western flower guides.