

Cowhorn orchid

(*Cyrtopodium punctatum*)

For definitions of botanical terms, visit en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Glossary_of_botanical_terms.

Cowhorn orchid is a stunning epiphytic wildflower that occurs in swamps and coastal uplands in South Florida. It typically grows on Cypress (*Taxodium* spp.) and Buttonwood (*Conocarpus erectus*) trees. Florida's once-abundant population was largely depleted in the early 20th century due to overcollection and habitat destruction. It is now a state-listed endangered species. The plant blooms in late winter through spring, with peak blooming in May.

Cowhorn orchid flowers employ a reproductive system of deceit pollination, whereby the flower emits a sweet fragrance to attract pollinators, particularly Carpenter (*Xylocopa* spp.) and Bumble (*Bombus* spp.) bees, but provides no nectar reward. The flowers are especially fragrant in the early afternoon and attract many bees at once, giving the plant another common name: Bee-swarm orchid.

The plant's extremely ornate flowers have bright yellow petals with dark red to purplish spots and a red to reddish-brown upward-curving tri-lobed labellum with yellow-orange markings. Sepals are gold with reddish-purple spots and are heavily curled. Flowers are born in multi-branched panicles that may be up to 3 feet long. Each inflorescence may produce 30 or more flowers. Leaves are long (up to 2½ feet) and lance-shaped with parallel venation. They are alternately arranged. Older leaves dry out and break on the midvein, leaving a sharp thorn-like appendage. Pseudobulbs are thick and may be 1–2 feet long. As the age, they become wrapped in papery sheaths that resemble cigar wrappers, leading to yet another common name: Cigar orchid. The plants' aerial roots attach to trees to hold the orchid in place. Its miniscule seeds are born in large (3½ inches long and up to 2 inches wide) green capsules that tend to nod.

Cyrtopodium punctatum was previously classified as *Epidendrum punctatum*.

Family: Orchidaceae (Orchid family)

Native range: Lee, Collier, Miami-Dade and Monroe counties

To see where natural populations of Cowhorn orchid have been vouchered, visit www.florida.plantatlas.usf.edu.

Hardiness: Zones 10–11

Lifespan: Deciduous perennial

Soil: Moist, well-drained leaf litter

Exposure: Minimal shade to full sun

Growth habit: Plant masses may be 2–5' wide

Propagation: Seed, division

Note: Although occasionally grown by enthusiasts, Cowhorn orchids are not commercially available and may not be harvested or sold without a permit.



Photo by Keith Bradley