



Orchids may be the largest group of flowering plants, with some 28,000 species growing in virtually every environment on Earth. To be honest, some experts now think that the family of asters and their relatives may actually be larger, but I tend to ignore such blasphemy. Orchids are the king, as far as I am concerned.

We all know the orchids, of course. They're those spectacularly showy blooms in green houses and florist shops, although new tissue culture techniques mean they show up at remarkably inexpensive prices even in the local grocery store. The blooms are so showy, some purists consider orchids too gaudy to take seriously.

Nevertheless, there are many of us who recognize the beauty of an orchid's bloom; we celebrate their unique, unusual shapes and their glorious range of color. We may be forgiven if we disregard the plants' foliage, which in most cases is fairly plain and not all that interesting. Often, the foliage is downright unattractive.

It is true that some orchids require some specialized care, perhaps approximating a tropical forest environment or a high bluff over a steamy river. Many, though, are beautifully suited to easy home care, with only regular, minimal attention and appropriate light levels.

Here's the kicker, though: orchids are *everywhere*. Well, almost everywhere, anyway. And I'm here to tell you about two of my favorites, two you may already have come across in your walks

Orchids In the Leaf Litter, Orchids In the Lawn

Written by Will Balk, Jr.

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around local woodlands or even while mowing your lawn.

The first, my family has come to call “the invisible orchid,” since its stalk of many small flowers in the late summer seem almost always to blend into the background of fallen leaves on the floor of the forest. It is also called the Crane-fly orchid, for the shape of each little flower is remarkably like that of the crane-fly. Botanically, it is *Tipularia discolor*.

You are much more likely to spot the leaf of this orchid – and right now is the perfect time of



year to keep your eye out for it.

There are numerous colonies of the Crane-fly orchid in our woodlands where the fallen leaves provide a fairly acidic layer of organic matter to the soil. Unknowingly, for years I often passed by these clumps of striking green leaves, low, flat to the ground, on woodland walks during the fall, winter and spring.

The leaves are green on top, perhaps with a crinkly texture (although not always) and sometimes accompanied by purplish spots. The underside of the leaf is hidden, and it surprises you when you turn over the leaf to spot its beautiful purple lower surface. There is no stem attached to the leaf, which keeps the leaf flat to the ground, and there is exactly one leaf to a plant.

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