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Native Orchids in Winter?

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Native Orchids in Winter?

No, there are no Virginia native orchids that flower in the dead of winter. Spent seed capsules, remnants of last summer's glory, can be spotted by hawk-eyed naturalists, but orchid flowers just don't tolerate the winter cold. A surprising number of native orchids, however, do retain living, photosynthetically active leaves above ground through our coldest months of December, January, and February. Perhaps the most common of these cold-tolerant orchids is the Crane-fly Orchid (*Tipularia discolor*), readily recognized by its two-toned leaves, dark green above and purple below. Of similar habit, but less frequently encountered, are the green-and-

white-striped leaves of Puttyroot (*Aplectrum hyemale*). Much smaller and easily overlooked are the winter rosettes of certain species of Ladies'-tresses (*Spiranthes*); rosettes of *S. lacera*, for example, are little larger than a quarter and could easily be mistaken for Deer-Tongue Grass (*Dichanthelium clandestinum*). The winter-adapted leaves of these genera are strictly seasonal, and these orchids flower in summer on leafless stems.

The only other orchids in Virginia with winter leaves are the Rattlesnake-plantains (*Goodyera* spp.); unlike those discussed above, these orchids are evergreen. We have two species, the rare Dwarf Rattle-



Downy Rattlesnake-plantain, *Goodyera pubescens* (Photo by John Hayden)

snake-plantain (*G. repens*), restricted to the mountains, and Downy Rattlesnake-plantain (*G. pubescens*) found throughout the commonwealth. To be an evergreen orchid

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2016 Wildflower of the Year Downy Rattlesnake-plantain

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growing on the forest floor must be especially challenging. These plants experience warm days of summer in the dim shade of the forest canopy and the bright light of winter when temperatures are at their coldest. Yet, somehow, they manage. Keep an eye out for Downy Rattlesnake-plantain this winter; its leaves are easily recognized by their broad white midvein and finer white reticulations. When you find one, contemplate the resilience of this unassuming species and make note of its location so you can return in summer to observe its delicate white flowers. Downy Rattlesnake-plantain is the 2016 VNPS Wildflower of the Year. Make an effort to get outside and appreciate it—truly an orchid for all seasons!
—*John Hayden, Botany Chair*