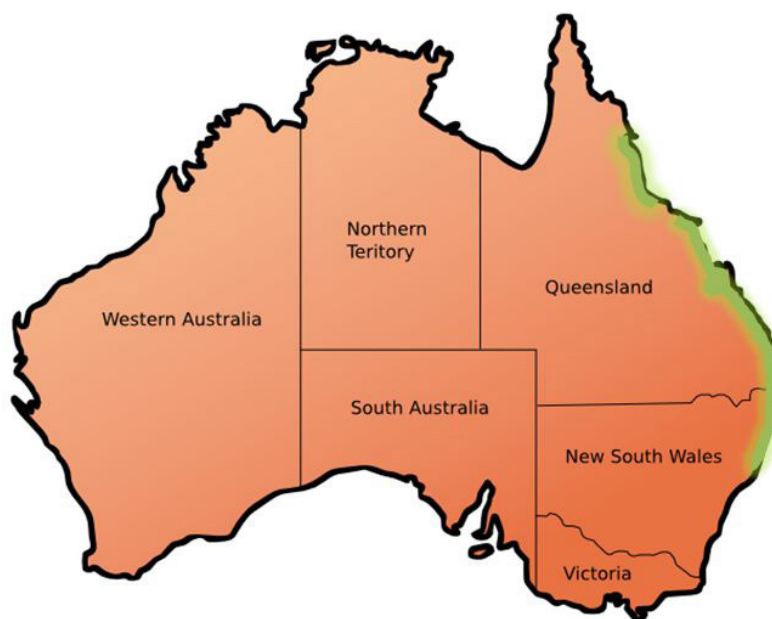


Lesser swamp orchid (*Phaius australis*)

The lesser swamp orchid is an endangered species of orchid which is found in Queensland and New South Wales. It is very similar to two other types of orchids, the greater swamp orchid and the yellow swamp orchid. The key difference between these orchids is the colouring.

Lesser swamp orchids are ground dwelling orchids which means they do not grow on trees or rocks as some other orchids do. Swamp orchids produce the largest flower of all Australian orchids. The leaves of the orchids are long and quite broad with each plant having 4 to 8 leaves. The flowers grow on the top of long stalks that are 70 to 110 cm long. The flowers are perfumed and are a red-brown colour, with yellow veins inside the flower. The tongue of the flower is pink.

Below is a map showing where the lesser swamp orchid can be found in the wild.



<http://www.clker.com/clipart-australia-map-3.html>

Habitat

The lesser swamp orchid is found in coastal wetlands, swampy grassland and swampy forest. They are often found where broad-leaved paperbark or swamp mahogany are found (types of trees). They prefer to live under closed forest in most areas, which means in filtered light. They often grow in small clumps. They can grow in a number of soil types from water-logged peat to peaty sand.


Life cycle

The lesser swamp orchid flowers in spring from September to November. Each spike produces 10 to 20 flowers. Following flowering, the plant produces fruit and thousands of tiny seeds may be produced within each fruit. These seeds then fall to the ground or are dispersed by animals that eat the fruit. The seeds rely on the growth of a special fungus to get their energy so that they can start growing into adult plants.

A picture of the lesser swamp orchid

Woodard, P, *Phaius australis* flowers, http://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Phaius_australis_flowers.jpg

The flowers growing on the stalk

Rodd, Tony, *Phaius australis* 100917-0622, http://www.flickr.com/photos/tony_rodd/5130706471/ 

Threats

One of the main threats to this species is the illegal collection of wild-growing populations. This orchid is one of Australia's most highly desired orchids because of its beauty and rarity. As such, people often collect the flower stems of plants growing near where people are. This affects the ability of the plant to reproduce because the fruit can't grow.

Another serious threat is the loss of habitat through development, farming, roadworks and tourism. Suitable habitat is often cleared, and swamps are drained or polluted.

Invasive species are also a threat to the lesser swamp orchid. Introduced weeds can take over the habitat of the orchid taking up space or blocking the light. Lantana is one of these weeds. Introduced animals are also a problem for this species. Wild pigs are not known to eat orchids but do dig them up to get to food in the soil. Cattle are known to eat orchids and trample the habitat and plants.

All orchids need a special fungus for the seed to start growing. It is important to maintain the fungal population in order to protect the lesser swamp orchid.

What humans are doing to help

It is illegal to collect and sell these plants from the wild. Some volunteers are monitoring the populations to try and protect them from collection. There is a threat abatement plan outlined by the Australian Government which suggest ways to get rid of feral pigs. The Redland City Council has also produced a report that recommends further education to protect the plant as a major priority.