

Nature Notes

Coral Root



The coral root found in the Kimberley Nature Park and the adjoining Horsebarn valley is mostly spotted coral root of species *Corallorhiza maculata*. It is a distinctive looking plant with reddish-purple stems and reddish flowers with wine-red spots on a white lower petal. The same species occurs in an albino form resulting in a yellowish colour and a white flower lip lacking spots. Albino and normal variants often occur in the same cluster of plants. There also is a similar species, the yellow coral root (*Corallorhiza trifida*) found in the HBV and KNP. The name “coral root” comes from the appearance of their interwoven underground stems that resemble some corals.

Members of this group of orchids derive their nutrition from existing organic matter meaning they are saprophytic. They obtain this organic matter by forming a close symbiotic relationship with soil fungi called



Normal and albino variants

mycorrhizae. Because organic matter can vary in abundance, coral root numbers can vary dramatically from place to place and season to season. In Horsebarn valley the same coral root cluster has produced 46 blossom stems one year and 3 stems the next year. Coral roots can live without chlorophyll since photosynthesis is not vital for a saprophytic plant though some chlorophyll is evident in the albino and yellow variants.



One should not feel too badly for the soil fungi that lose nutrients to the coral root since the fungi in turn take their nutrients from tree roots. Mycorrhizae add greatly to the surface area of the roots of their tree hosts, making the trees better able to absorb water and dissolved minerals. This is a great example of the interdependence of forest species. Even though coral roots have pretty little orchid-like blossoms, you will have to enjoy them where they grow naturally since they are nearly impossible to cultivate due to their dependence upon mycorrhizal fungi species not present in cultivated gardens.

Spotted Coral Root, Photos: S Robertson

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