

---

**Wildflower Spot – May 2011**  
John Clayton Chapter of the Virginia Native Plant Society

---

## PINK LADY-SLIPPER

*Cypripedium acaule*

By Helen Hamilton, *President of the John Clayton Chapter, VNPS*

No flower is more recognizable than the pink lady-slipper, with a distinctive inflated slipper-like lip petal, veined with red and with a crease down the front. This is our only lady-slipper without stem leaves. Surrounding the base of the flower-stem is a subopposite pair of wide, ribbed, and oval 8-inch leaves.

These perennial orchids are found in acid soil, from swamps and bogs to dry woods and sand-dunes. They do poorly in deep shade and are usually found in old forests with broken canopy or in young forests regenerating after logging or fire. Road cuts and other edge habitats are also good places to find them.

Lady-slippers are native to every county in Virginia, growing along the mountains and coastal plain to South Carolina and Alabama, and in most areas of eastern and central U.S. and Canada.

This species is very difficult to grow under garden conditions, and must have certain microscopic fungi which the tiny seeds require for development. They should never be moved from their natural habitat unless they are in imminent danger of destruction.

Orchids often have swollen, ball-shaped tubers, suggesting testicles; these roots are widely



regarded as aphrodisiacs. The “doctrine of signatures” refers to an ancient idea that if a plant part was shaped like a human organ or suggested a disease, then that plant was useful for that particular organ or ailment. A plant widely used in the 1800’s as a sedative, the hairy stems have caused dermatitis. Both the pink and yellow lady-slipper were often harvested in the 19th century, contributing to scarcity in the current century (from *Medicinal Plants and Herbs*, Foster and Duke, 2000.)

The word “orchid” derives from the Greek for “testicle”, which the genus name comes from Latin for Venus slipper. ❖

---

**Photo:** Pink lady-slipper (*Cypripedium acaule*) taken by Helen Hamilton  
For more information about native plants visit [www.vnps.org](http://www.vnps.org).