

# *Galearis spectabilis* (L.) Rafinesque

showy orchis



Photo by Steven P. Grund

**Status:** State threatened

**Global and state rank:** G5/S2

**Family:** Orchidaceae (orchid)

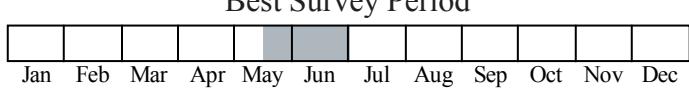
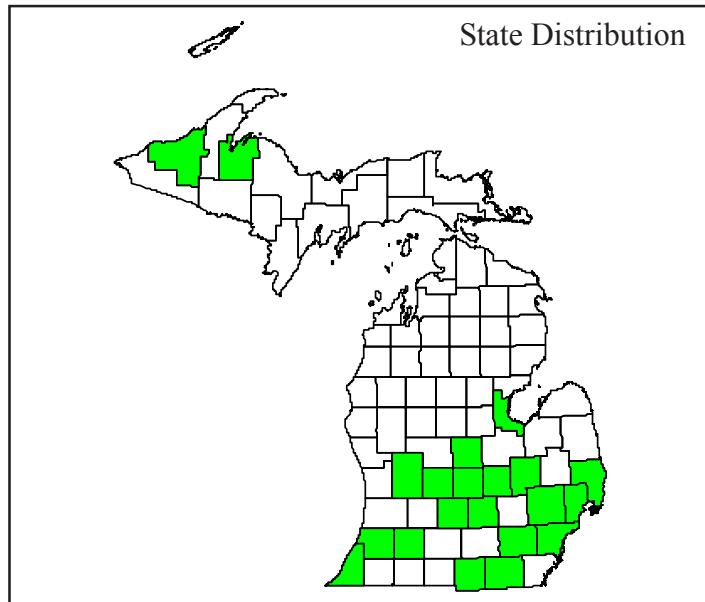
**Synonomy:** *Orchis spectabilis* Linnaeus, *Orchis humilis* Michx., *Galeorchis spectabilis* (Linnaeus) Rydberg

**Taxonomy:** Showy orchis was maintained in the genus *Orchis* by most taxonomists until recently. Some now include this species in the genus *Galearis* as originally proposed by Rafinesque in 1836. Two species are known from this genus, only one of which (*G. spectabilis*) occurs in North America, the other occurring in eastern Asia.

**Total range:** This North American species is distributed throughout the eastern deciduous forest region, ranging from Quebec and New Brunswick through south-central Michigan and Wisconsin to southern Minnesota and Iowa, south to Arkansas, Missouri, and Kansas.

**State distribution:** In Michigan, showy orchis is known primarily from the five southern-most tiers of counties in the Lower Peninsula, with its northern-most location in Bay County. Disjunct populations are also known from Ontonagon and Baraga counties in the western Upper Peninsula. The species appears to be declining in the state and it was recently upgraded from State special concern to State threatened (MDNR 1999).

**Recognition:** Showy orchis is a low growing orchid (6-20 cm) arising from a short, tuberless rhizome (underground stem) with **one pair of ovate basal leaves** and a single stout and often stubby flower stalk bearing from one to



ten flowers. The flowers appear two-parted with a **deep pink upper "hood"** formed by the joining of sepals and lateral petals, perched above a **white lower petal which forms a spurred lip**. **Deep green, conspicuous, leaflike bracts subtend the flowers**, creating a striking color contrast from which the plant likely derives its name "showy" orchis. Although striking, Michigan populations are apparently less colorful, shorter, and stubbier than those in the Blue Ridge and Cumberland Plateau regions.

**Habitat:** This species is found primarily in rich deciduous woods, although vigorous woodland colonies are known to spread to more open habitat in Michigan, and in New England it is reported from hemlock forests (Case 1987). Showy orchis often occurs near temporary spring ponds in sandy clay or rich loam soils, or in the shadier and richer microhabitats alongside such common spring ephemerals as *Claytonia virginica* (spring beauty), *Trillium grandiflorum* (large-flowered trillium), and *Hepatica* spp. (hepatica). In Fort Custer Training Center in Kalamazoo County, associates include *Liriodendron tulipifera* (tulip), *Quercus rubra* (red oak), *Fraxinus americana* (white ash), *Tilia americana* (basswood), *Carya glabra* (pignut hickory), *Ostrya virginiana* (ironwood), *Carpinus caroliniana* (blue-beech), *Erigenia bulbosa* (harbinger-of-spring), *Caulophyllum thalictroides* (blue cohosh), *Hydrophyllum appendiculatum* (water-leaf), *Carex hirtifolia* (sedge), *C. jamesii* (sedge), and *Hystrix patula* (bottle-brush grass).

**Biology:** Showy orchis generally flowers from mid-May to June and apparently does not tolerate much competition. In some areas it is locally abundant, but more commonly it



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grows as isolated plants or in small colonies.

**Conservation/management:** Protection of the orchid's rich forest habitat is critical for the survival of this species. It is likely vulnerable to canopy removal and to significant changes in hydrology. It is also possibly at risk of exploitation due to its attractiveness.

**Related abstracts:** mesic northern forest, Assiniboa sedge, fairy bells, ginseng, goblin fern, goldenseal, green spleenwort, Hart's-tongue fern, large toothwort, walking fern, red-shouldered hawk

#### Selected references

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Luer, C.A. 1979. The Native Orchids of the United States and Canada excluding Florida. N.Y. Bot. Garden, New York, NY.

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#### Abstract citation

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