

CRANEFLY ORCHID

Tipularia discolor

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A familiar site in rich woods in the winter is the single leaf of the summer-blooming crane-fly orchid. This species usually occurs in colonies – several leaves, each representing a single plant, are usually seen together. Green on the upper surface, the underside is shining purple. The top surface may be smooth or corrugated, but the underside is always beet red.

When the orchid blooms in mid-July, no leaves are visible. The flower of Crane-fly orchid is very delicate and inconspicuous. Pale green and pale purple to beige, no more than ½ inch across, it is easily overlooked, unlike the winter leaf which signals the presence of this orchid. The flowers are only noticed when a shaft of slanting fall sunlight highlights what reminds some people of a swarm of small insects - hence “crane-fly.” The genus name of the crane-fly is *Tipula*. Another common name is Elfin’s Spur.

Another common name, “Crippled Crane-fly” refers to the flowers which incline slightly to the right or left. This is necessary for pollination by night-flying moths, when the pollen-bearing sacs become attached to the moth’s eye.



Crane-fly orchid is not usually available in nurseries since, like all native orchids, it is dependent on fungi in the ground and all parts of the plant are basically inconspicuous. However, on a walk through local woods in the winter, the green leaves are a welcome sight in the midst of brown leaf litter.

Growing naturally in nearly all counties of Virginia, Crane-fly orchid is found in rich damp woods from Massachusetts to southern Michigan, Florida and east Texas. ❖