

Beautiful Strangers by Fran Benton

Now that the planting season is mostly done we get a bit more time to stop and smell the roses. Ah, don't get me going about those stupid roses...!

Sometimes just prowling around the untended bits of your property or local walkways can bring surprises. Last week I was walking up Mt Tzouhalem to the Garry Oak meadow and I spotted something strange. Looking closer I found I was staring at a native orchid. When I got closer I remembered that this was a member of the Corallorhiza, or Spotted Coral Root, a group of ground orchids that are found in deep woods. As they are very inconspicuous I dug out the camera and spent some time rolling around on the ground getting good pictures. Just as I finished a fellow photo fiend arrived trailside and wanted to know what the heck I was doing. I introduced him to these lovely orchids and left him in my spot getting lots of cool close ups.

These orchids live a curious life. They do not produce chlorophyll and do not photosynthesize. They get their nourishment from the mycorrhizal fungi that produce the common mushroom *Russula*. Think about that for a minute. Fungus feeds on roots and tissues of plants. So the Spotted coral root is feeding on the fungus that in turn is feeding on other plants. The particular fungus Coral Root is feeding on is a super common big red brown mushroom. Now I am just saying that I would not want to be getting my nourishment from a genus of mushrooms that are known as the sickeners. *Russula emetica*, the sickener mushroom, is the common mushroom in these woods. Nope, definitely NOT edible. So if you can't eat it, can you use it in other ways? Spotted Coralroot orchids were used by Native Americans as remedies for colds, pneumonia, and skin irritation. Nope, I'll stick with Tylenol, antibiotics, and Nivea cream! There are a lot of interesting parasitic plants that live in our area and are worth keeping an eye out for. As the summer progresses watch for dodder. This is a very cool parasite that grows on sea asparagus or *Salicornia*. You may also know this plant as pickleweed. The dodder grows on and through the plants stems. *Salicornia* is a part of a delicate ecosystem and although it is greatly loved by chefs, it's quite endangered so, like the Spotted Coral root, admire but don't pick! Boy we are lucky to live in the Pacific Northwest where there are so many weird and wonderful plant strangers to meet!

