

Orchids in Native American Medicine

The roots of the lady slipper were used in Native American medicine to bring down fevers, ease menstrual and labor pains and to counter insomnia and nervous conditions, and even to induce the dream state. The Chippewa placed the dried and remoistened root directly onto skin inflammations and toothaches to relieve discomfort. The most popular species was the yellow lady's slipper, *Cypripedium parviflorum*, favored by the Cherokee in Georgia all the way to the Ojibwe in Canada. The Menominee of



Wisconsin and the Penobscots of the Northeast also used the pink lady's slipper.

Native Americans generally collected the roots in the fall or early spring, dried them out and ground them into a powder. Since many of the active ingredients didn't dissolve in water, they often used some form of alcohol instead. Its use was largely limited to traditionally "feminine" diseases, which included hysteria.

When the European settlers came to North America they integrated the lady's slipper herb into their own healing repertoires as a sleep aid when valerian was not available. *Cypripedium pubescens* and *Cypripedium parviflorum* were listed in the United States Pharmacopoeia between the period of 1863 and 1916. It was used to treat hysteria, irritability, headaches,

insomnia, epilepsy, and even restlessness in children. Unfortunately, lady's slipper was used so much that it became more and more difficult to find in the wild. Today, it is rare to stumble upon this beautiful flower.

The orchid's calming powers come from a chemical called cypripedin, a bitter, cinnamon-colored powder in its underground stems. One 19th century writer called it "rather unpleasant" with an odor "not very unlike that noticed when near a herd of swine." Another described the mixture as having "the color of a ruby port and the scent of fecal matter." Nonetheless, Western doctors prescribed it for hysterics, hypochondria, other "diseases of a



In June, there were masses of Yellow Lady's slipper [*Cypripedium parviflorum*] in bloom near the Ridges Sanctuary

nervous character," and even as relief for symptoms of sexual over indulgence.

But even as its popularity grew among colonists, the orchid came to take on a more tragic meaning. Poets like William Bryant began using the moccasin flower as a symbol of death, both of people and, on a deeper level, of Native American culture:

There, I think, on that lonely grave,

*Violets spring in the soft May shower;
There, in the summer breezes wave
Crimson phlox and moccasin flower.*

Yet there was one exception. In 1879, 16-year-old Elaine Goodale Eastman wrote "The Moccasin Flower," and made the orchid a symbol of isolation and distant pride:

*Yet shy and proud among the forest flowers,
In maiden solitude,
Is one whose charm is never wholly ours,
Nor yielded to our mood:
One true-born blossom, native to our skies,
We dare not claim as kin,
Nor frankly seek, for all that in it lies,
The Indian's moccasin.*

The Legend of the Moccasin Flower



— Many winters ago, on the shores of the Great Lake, lived a young Ojibwa maiden. The only person left

whole when a devastating disease struck her village, she set out in the dark of the winter dawn to a neighboring village to get healing herbs to save the sick. She wore her warmest robe, leggings and the fur-lined moccasins that her mother and grand-mother had sewn.

Through the blowing snow she saw the faint lights of campfires in the medicine woman's village across the ice. Scrambling over the slippery pack ice, the maiden lightly danced across the frozen lake, trying not to listen to the cracking and groaning of the ice beneath her feet.

Hours later the villagers welcomed her when she reached the other side. Wrapped in warm beaver robes and fed, the maiden told her story. The medicine

woman gathered her herbs, and the maiden refused the invitation to stay the night but insisted that she begin the return journey immediately. The maiden put the pouch of medicine around her neck and slipped down to the lake shore. She tried again to dance lightly across the drifted snow. It was too deep. She sank deeper with each step. Exhausted, she lay back in the snow panting for breath.

The snow whispered, "Be wise!" and she figured out, like the fox, how to free herself. She swam like the otter through the deepest



snow to the pack ice, losing her fur-lined moccasins along the way. Her feet were bare and cold. The sharp crystals of wind-blown snow cut her feet at every step. Soon her feet were red and raw and her footprints marked by blood.

She persevered and as the eastern sky began to lighten, she reached the opposite shore. The medicine she brought saved her village.

In the spring, when she returned to look for her moccasins, she found instead a patch of small pink-and-white flowers shaped just like moccasins. There was one for every drop of blood that had fallen from the maiden's feet on her journey to bring medicine home from the other side of the lake.

The Ojibwa people named the flower *ma-ki-sin-waabig-waan*. We call it Lady's Slipper. They bloom in May and June in the moist pine/hardwood forests of northern Wisconsin.