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The PASSION PROJECTS Issue

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The Orchid by Kamilla Tolnø

*This is the orchid unfolding with the day
inviting you in to her world of love and grace
of passion and strength the lust for life
that trusts in the sun to come with the morning
this is the pink wings lifting your spirits
opening your eyes to the magic
the beginnings in every end and in yourself*

On reading this charming poem by Danish poet Kamilla Tolnø, I'm struck by how her evocative words invite us every day to embark on a journey of self-discovery, sensitivity and kindness to ourselves. Up to 28,000 different orchid species exist across the globe, making them the second largest flowering plant family after the daisy. There are another 192,000 different hybrids on the International Orchid Register. Despite their delicate grace and beauty, orchids also signify resilience and the ability to thrive in the harshest of conditions. Surprisingly, they can grow in various environments from barren deserts and mountaintops to tropical rainforests, swamps and even the arctic tundra. In the 19th century, 'Orchidelirium' fuelled the desire of wealthy Victorians to get their hands on these exotic floral wonders. This feverish orchid collecting became an international obsession with wealthy patrons and nurserymen employing trained horticulturists and working-class 'plant hunters' on ill-fated expeditions to retrieve prized specimens from their natural habitats. Such exploits came at great monetary, human and ecological cost. These brave, or rather fool-hardy, plant hunters faced unforeseen dangers in tropical jungles and deadly rivalries from fellow hunters whilst damaging fragile ecosystems in the process.

Today more than 50 native British orchids grow in the UK, and many can be seen here in East Anglia. Like bluebells, orchids in the wild are legally protected by the Wildlife and Countryside Protection Act 1981 so it's illegal to uproot them. If you want to create your own wildflower meadow in your garden, then specialist nurseries like Cumbria Wildflowers and British Orchids can supply native plants. As with all flowers, the primary purpose of the orchid is to reproduce, and the Bee Orchid, *Ophrys apifera*, has developed a spurious way to lure pollinators. It's so named because it has adapted to mimic a female bee. The pink wing-like sepals and yellow markings on its furry, brown, velvet lips attract and deceive unsuspecting male bees into mating with it. The county flower of Bedfordshire, the Bee Orchid is most commonly found on dry, chalky and

Pyramidal Orchid
(*Anacamptis pyramidalis*)

THE FLOWER OF LOVE

Symbolising love and passion, orchids are a perfect alternative to roses on Valentine's Day. Velvet's Melanie Taylor explores the beauty of orchids that historically inspired love – and fierce rivalries – wherever they bloomed



**Common
spotted orchid**
(*Dactylorhiza fuchsii*)

limestone grasslands and verges from June to July.

Of all our native orchids, the one most often seen is the Common Spotted Orchid, *Dactylorhiza fuchsii*, which grows

abundantly in woodlands, marshes and old quarries. Named after the countless purple spots on its green leaves, their heavily perfumed white, pink or even purple flowers are beloved by day flying moths.

The Pyramidal orchid, *Anacamptis pyramidalis*, is a cheery cluster of densely packed pink flowers perched on a bright green stem. Often seen in coastal habitats, scrubland and railway embankments, it flowers from June to July. I once happily came across it along Devil's Dyke.

Also close to home, Fulbourn Fen and Wicken Fen are carpeted with thousands of delightful pink and purple flowering Early Marsh and Southern Marsh orchids between May and August (see the Wildlife Trust for more details – wildlifebcn.org).

These diminutive native species are very different from the showy commercially grown, hybridised orchids found in the

houseplant section of garden centres and supermarkets. But don't shy away from these cellophane wrapped treasures; it's possible to create the right conditions to care for them at home. All they need is a little tender loving care and a healthy dose of patience.

Phalaenopsis - One of the most popular is the *Phalaenopsis* or 'Moth Orchid'. Without rhizomes, these monopodial orchids have a single stem from which the roots, leaves and flowers grow. Sometimes baby plantlets known as keikis emerge instead of flowers (keiki being the Hawaiian word for child). Use a free-draining, bark-based orchid potting mix to ensure plenty of airflow around the roots and allow your *phalaenopsis* to dry out between watering. My rule of thumb is to water on observation. When the roots turn silvery grey, place your orchid in a sink and run it under a light trickle of water until the roots turn bright green and then leave it to dry out before watering again.

Cattleya - Compared to the understated grace and elegance of the *Phalaenopsis*, the big blousy blooms of the *Cattleya* literally command attention; it's no wonder they're known as the Queen of Orchids. The flowers of the *Cattleya trianae* (Christmas Orchid) can measure up to 20cm across and are the national flower of Colombia. They need bright indirect light, moderate temperatures and benefit from regular misting to maintain humidity. Water when the soil has partially dried out.

Cymbidium - The spires of *Cymbidiums*, commonly known as 'Boat Orchids' because of the shape of their lips, produce bold colourful blooms from late autumn to spring, providing exotic glamour and a heady fragrance in colder months. Preferring bright but not direct light, moderate watering and cooler conditions than some other tender indoor orchids, 10–24°C is ideal. *Cymbidiums* benefit from a spell outside over the summer where the difference between day and nighttime temperatures can help to trigger their flowering period.



Cattleya trianae

Orchid lovers can flock to the annual Kew Gardens Orchid Festival which this year celebrates its 30th anniversary, from February 7 to March 8. Solène Dequiet, Glass House Manager of the Princess of Wales Conservatory at the Royal Botanic Gardens, Kew says: "For Kew's 30th Orchid Festival, we are inspired by China's incredible biodiversity and cultural richness.

"We will celebrate Chinese tradition with plants and people at its heart, from intricate orchid displays to symbolic animals sculptures and art. It's a joyful celebration of nature, creativity and connection during the cold winter months— and a reminder of the importance of protecting the world's biodiversity."

Tickets to the Orchid Festival are included in Kew's garden entry price, but slots must be booked in advance at kew.org/kew-gardens/whats-on/orchids-china. Orchids After Dark tickets are also available on specific Friday and Saturday evenings – February 13, 14, 20, 21, 27 and 28 from 6.30pm-10pm – but don't include daytime entry to the gardens.



Cymbidium

Reflecting on Kamilla's poem, we, like orchids, have the potential to repeatedly unfurl and bloom. Through personal growth we can stay true to ourselves and develop self-love and compassion from within. As February creeps in and our new year's resolutions are perhaps faltering, let's make 2026 a year of being kinder to ourselves as well as those around us.

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Phalaenopsis



Bee Orchid
(Ophrys apifera)