

## Giant Orchid

By Alfred R. Schotz

Botanist/Ecologist, Alabama Natural Heritage Programs

Of all flowering plants, orchids are surely to be counted among the most beautiful, for since their introduction into cultivation they have become a symbol of all that is exotic and extravagant. Like lilies, to which they are related, orchids have acquired an air of fantasy and an association with a sophisticated world of glamour and wealth. Beginning with Chinese merchants, collectors have risked their lives to retrieve them from far-off corners of the world, braving the unspeakable horrors of tropical swamps so that these exquisite flowers may adorn the lavish lifestyles of European aristocracy.

The Orchidaceae is the largest of all families of flowering plants, with around 800 genera represented by 30,000 species. To the unimpressed, this means that nearly one in every 15 flowering plants is an orchid. The general perception of orchids evokes images of the mystical and distant lands of the equator, and rightly so, for orchids are most commonly encountered in tropical regions. However, people are astonished to learn that several species are distributed across the cooler regions of the Northern Hemisphere, including more than 200 species in North America.



Photo courtesy of Alfred Schotz

As for Alabama with its rich soil, ample rainfall, and temperate climate, it is prime orchid country producing a striking diversity of colors and shapes. In fact, a number of orchids – 56 species in

all – embellish the Heart of Dixie. Truly, one of the state's rarest and most cherished wildflowers is the giant orchid (*Pteroglossaspis ecristata*), a globally imperiled species restricted to the open pinelands of the southeastern Coastal Plain and western Cuba. With the approach of late summer the plant reveals its true glory, a closely applied series of yellowish-green and dark purple flowers arranged on a stem three to four feet in height.

The giant orchid was first brought to the attention of the scientific world from a series of collections made by Ferdinand Rugel along the banks of the St. Johns River near Jacksonville, Florida in 1842. During the time of its discovery, *Pteroglossaspis ecristata* likely attained some prominence in the vast longleaf pine ecosystem that once characterized the Southeast. However, as the majestic woodlands of the longleaf monarchy began to dwindle, so did the giant orchid, to such low levels prompting the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service to classify the species as special concern and one in need of urgent attention. Historical accounts fur-

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nished by early plantmen such as Rugel offered preliminary but essential information regarding the ecology of this and a panoply of other species endemic to the southeastern coastal pinelands. Then, as now, fire caused by lightning strikes associated with spring and summer thunderstorms was the most pervasive driving force maintaining this system. These naturally occurring fires were essential for retarding the growth of trees and shrubs that would otherwise invade and eliminate the unique concentration of plant life that has come to make these areas special. In fact, many of the plants found here are dependent upon periodic fire to stimulate growth and reproduction.

Efforts are currently underway between the Alabama Natural Heritage Program and various federal agencies to acquire a greater understanding of population dynamics and the rangewide status of this species. So far, preliminary studies have shown that the giant orchid responds most favorably following early season burns, specifically during periods associated with abundant rainfall. This research also involves measuring the long-term effects of livestock grazing and other human-derived disturbances as they relate to species viability. It is suspected that the presence of grazing has been instrumental in providing needed disturbance for the giant orchid by keeping some sites open from competing vegetation and to promote germination. Only in time will we be able to piece together enough information to begin understanding the delicate relationship between this species and the natural system of which it is a part. If we are to preserve this species, a devoted commitment toward research and conservation will be our only hope of ensuring that this emblem of the state's natural heritage is there for future generations to know.

Further information can be obtained by contacting the Alabama Natural Heritage Program, Huntingdon College, Massey Hall, 1500 East Fairview Avenue, Montgomery, AL 36106. ☛

# Alabama Forestry Camp 2003

By *James Jennings*

Outreach Forester, Alabama Forestry Commission, NW Region

**T**he 2003 session of Alabama Forestry Camp, in its seventh year, will take place from Sunday, June 1, through Thursday, June 5. The camp will be held at the Federation of Southern Cooperatives facility near Epes, Alabama in Sumter County.

Alabama Forestry Camp is a five-day experience for high school students interested in forestry, conservation, and/or natural resources. It is designed to introduce basic forestry concepts through classroom instructions and outdoor activities. At this year's camp, students will participate in classes covering tree identification, forest management, forest products, wildlife, water quality, urban forestry, and forest history. In addition, there will be off-campus visits to Gulf States Corporation's Westervelt Lodge and sawmill. However, Forestry Camp is not "all work and no play." There are also recreational and evening activities. A visit to Moundville Archeological Park is planned as well as a fun day of fishing at the Charles A. Farquhar State Cattle Ranch. During Career Night, students will have the opportunity to talk to college recruiters about careers in forestry and natural resources.

The purpose of the camp is to provide a positive learning experience. The final day of the camp includes a graduation ceremony and a luncheon for the students and family members with the instructors and counselors. All students will receive a certificate of completion of the camp.

Alabama Forestry Camp is open to any boy or girl aged 15-18 who has completed the ninth grade but not yet graduated from high school. There is **no cost to the student** to attend camp; however, each student is responsible for providing his or her own transportation to and from camp. All other transportation, meals, and snacks will be provided. Students will be housed in dormitories with 24-hour adult supervision.

**Space is limited.** An application must be completed and signed by both student and parent or guardian. **All applications must be postmarked by April 11, 2003.**

If you know of someone interested in attending the Alabama Forestry Camp, have him or her call any county office of the Alabama Forestry Commission for an application or for more information. ☛



*Attendees of the 2002 Class at Alabama Forestry Camp.*