

Hardy orchids for Illinois gardens:

By Mitsuko Williams

Most of the orchids that we grow are tropical plants that need to be grown indoors during cold months, but there are a number of orchids which can be grown outdoors in your garden. Years ago, Illinois was home to a variety of wild orchids that claimed shady woodlands or sunny prairies home. While there are still some patches of them left here and there, without careful protection, their survival cannot be guaranteed. Luckily for us, now there are growers who are able to propagate some of these orchids, particularly slipper orchids, thus making it possible for us to grow them as garden plants.

A. Orchids native to U.S. and Canada:

Interested in creating a woodland garden? Slipper orchids (*Cypripedium* species) will make wonderful companions among your woodland plants.



Many species of *Cypripedium*s (lady's slipper orchids) can be grown in Central Illinois, though they do best in protected areas. In nature, yellow lady's slipper (*Cypripedium parviflorum*) and white lady's slipper (*Cyp. candidum*, *Cyp. andrewsii*) orchids are found in rich, moist, and fairly open deciduous or mixed forests, so a woodland-like garden site will provide good planting environment, if it receives no more than 4-5 hours of morning but not the hot afternoon sun.





The showy lady's slipper (*Cypripedium reginae*) may be more difficult to grow in Illinois because they like more moisture in the soil than the yellow lady's slippers and colder winter with heavy snow cover. Both yellow and showy lady's slippers prefer soil pH of around 4.5-5. Good mulching in the fall and winter snow cover also help the plants survive and thrive.

The key to successful hardy orchid growing is good soil drainage. For this reason, planting them in raised beds filled with porous soil mix is critical. A small amount of compost mixed in the soil in the spring and late summer will suffice for fertilizer. Never use garden fertilizer such as Miracle Grow or moisture retentive soil mix. The lack of deep snow cover in Illinois can be adjusted by a 1-2 feet of leaf mulch given in the fall. The leaves should be fluffed up in early March, and gradually removed from the bed. The *Cypripedium* roots spread near the surface, and this mulching process is vital to the survival of the plants.

A good supplier for our area is Itasca Ladyslipper Farm in Minnesota (ladyslipperfarm.com/). They recommend to:

1. dig a hole 1 1/2 to 2 feet in diameter and 1 to 1 1/2 feet deep,
2. fill the bottom 1/3 with sand,
3. fill the hole 2/3 of the way with the following mix,
 - 1 part top soil (black dirt);
 - 2 parts perlite (large particle is better);
 - 1 part coir (coconut husk) or sandbox sand;
4. place the plant 1/4 to 3/4 inch below the surface and finish filling the hole.

The article by D. Nickrent (<http://nickrentlab.siu.edu/OrchidsIllinois.html>) provides county-based maps of native orchids in Illinois. Additional information is also available at: <https://pss.uvm.edu/ppp/articles/hardyorchid.html>

There are other supplier and informational websites. Soil mixture and planting recommendation may vary from grower to grower depending on their location.

5. Where you can see in nature: *Cypripediums* are found in nature in Illinois (limited; Orchid Hill), Ohio (Cedar Bog Nature Preserve); Wisconsin (Door County); and Minnesota (Landscape Arboretum; and many nature preserves); Missouri (Missouri Botanical Garden).

B. Non-native hardy orchids:

Bletilla species (Chinese ground orchids) are gaining popularity as another hardy orchid suitable for gardens in our area. They can be grown in bright light in normal garden soil as long as it drains well. They can be grown in slightly more acidic soil than the slipper orchids.

In Central Illinois, they should be planted 3-4 inches deep. In winter, mulch with 6-10 inches of loose materials, pine needles being the ideal. Wind protection is helpful. The cage in the image at left is to keep rabbits from eating the leaves.

Less hardy Bletilla species (such as *Bletilla ochracea*, Chinese butterfly orchid) can be grown in the ground but should be lifted up in the fall and brought in a cool, non-freezing space for the winter.



Above right: *Bletilla striata* 'Big Bob' growing in full sun. Photo compliment of W. Mathis.