

## Bee Orchids by Dr Owen Wilby



I found my first Bee Orchids in Occold almost 30 years ago, on what was to become the Playing Field behind the Beaconsfield pub. The question then was “should we move them some-where safer” – and, at the time, I said “Yes”. My advice now would be quite different – “leave them alone, they’ll come to no harm”.

Any one seeing a clump of these beautiful exotic looking flowers can be forgiven for thinking they are delicate rarities that need cotton-wool protection. In truth they are hardy, tough as old boots and positively thrive in regularly mown grassland – but obviously, if you cut the flower spike off before the buds open, you’ll not see the “bees”.

What actually happens when the flower stalk is cut (and rabbits are just as effective as mowers) is that the plant goes back into vegetative mode, produces more leaves, more side shoots and more food storage tubers so that, next year, it can produce twice as many flower spikes. From this you can probably deduce that a plant trimmed three years in a row, then allowed to flower, could produce up to eight flower spikes in a clump, as shown overleaf.

The individual flowers look, and smell, exactly like small female bumblebees sipping nectar from a three-petaled pink flower.

Male bees of the same species, seeing and smelling an available female “otherwise engaged”, fly down and try to mate with “her”. In the process, the male picks up pollen masses from the plant on his head and transfers them to the next flower he tries his luck with.

So what does kill a Bee Orchid? – Allowing it to flower, that’s what! This is the natural sequence of events: after the flower spike sets seed, the plant’s food stores are exhausted and the leaves wither. The ripe seed pods open to allow millions of dust-fine seeds to blow away and find new homes, and the parent plant dies. Next year there may be a few small rosettes of leaves from younger plants or surviving offsets of the parent plant, but the glorious display will not be repeated until the new plants have built up sufficient reserves.

However, because the seed will only germinate and grow where the right soil fungus is found, good Bee Orchid sites will host many generations of the plants but new sites can spring up in surprising places. At this time of the year you should be looking for clusters of succulent silvery green pointed leaves forming rosettes in the grass. These are on an “island” with 50 or so others.

If you want to see the flowers, mark the plants with stakes and make sure they don't get mowed, but don't get precious about them. We have literally hundreds of plants in dozens of habitats, ranging from closely mown lawns to rough shrubby grassland that has not been touched for years.

The Bee Orchid may look delicate and exotic, but it is a hardy survivor – all it needs is for a few plants to be allowed to bloom and set seed each year and the survival of the species is assured, so this is what I do.