

Endangered orchid shows it has an attitude

“This (the white-fringed orchid) is one of the most beautiful wildflowers in a prairie. Rejoice should you discover one or two plants in bloom.”

So says a website describing Illinois wildflowers, and indeed, the eastern whitefringed prairie orchid is not only attractive, it's uncommon enough to be on Wisconsin's endangered species list (as well as Illinois').

I've written about this rare plant in the past, describing how there was land near us where these scarce orchids were not only growing, but flourishing. Every year, when they came into bloom around the Fourth of July, we would do our annual orchid count, flagging the flowers and keeping tabs of where they were concentrated. With each census, the numbers grew until the flood of 2008.

After weeks of hard rains that year, I could have canoed from my deer stand in the woods bordering the orchid field all the way to Lake Koshkonong. For months the field was under several feet of water. When it finally subsided about the time the plants should have been blooming, there was nothing but rotting vegetation littering the ground.

Evidently the orchids were resilient. A few years later they were back—not in the numbers they had been, but enough to raise hopes that they soon would be.

Then there was last summer's drought. Since prairie orchids require moist ground to grow in, they were especially vulnerable to the endless weeks of searing sun and cloudless skies. By July, when they should have been flowering, there was no trace of them other than a few shriveled stalks.

To add insult to injury, for several weeks this spring, much of the field was again under water. After taking a double whammy in a single year, there wasn't much hope.

Against all odds, last week I found three flowering plants. When I returned with flags to mark them I ran into 39 more.

Equally as remarkable as their resiliency to extreme weather changes is the history of the field they grow in. When we moved to the area, it was used to raise corn.

Since the orchid requires undisturbed land, the yearly plowing and planting made conditions impossible for it to take hold. Even when the field was set aside in CRP, it was sprayed on a fairly regular basis to eliminate brush and reed canary grass—another big no-no on the list of things prairie orchids don't like.

During those years we used the field for hunting, tramped around on it, cut native grasses down for duck blinds, plowed firebreaks and even ran a road down the middle of it. Then, amazingly, after doing just about everything you're

not supposed to do to encourage this endangered plant (which we didn't even realize was in the area), one summer a few orchids took root and bloomed.

Probably one of the reasons for their appearance is the fact that each March the field gets burned (at least when it's not under water), keeping invasive, non-indigenous and native flora at bay. The white-fringe likes open sunlight, and there's plenty of that.

Then, too, there must be something unique about the pH of the soil in that area, as well as the presence of a particular fungus it needs to propagate, making the field ideal.

One thing I've learned from the ongoing neighborhood orchid saga is how tenacious this plant seems to be. When you hear the word "endangered," you often associate the term with some wimpy snail or little fish that can't seem to make it on its own without some help.

True, this fussy flower is pollinated only at night by hawkmoths and requires special soil. In spite of its little fringy blooms that give it the look of some kind of botanical French poodle, it's one tough customer.

You can cut it, spray it, flood it, starve it for water and ignore its needs and it will fight to come back. It's a plant with an attitude!

D.S. Pledger is an outdoors columnist for The Gazette. Email him at maus16@centurytel.net



D.S. Pledger

The eastern white-fringed prairie orchid is alive and doing fine in land owned by outdoor columnist D.S. Pledger.