

Urban Nature Watch for TerraGreen by Sanjay Sondhi

Published in August 2010

The Foxtail Orchid

I was out shopping with my wife, Anchal, on Rajpur Road in Dehradun. As I went about doing some routine chores for the house, I watched, as Anchal, who was sitting in the car, whipped out the camera, and clicked away. She was standing under a mango tree, and I wondered why she found raw, green mangoes so captivating, so as to want to photograph them. As I walked up to her, she pointed up to the tree.

Growing on the bare tree trunk of the mango tree, about eight feet above us, was a clump of gorgeous pink flowers, arising from a cluster of thick green leaves. Foxtail orchids, I exclaimed. Anchal pointed to other mango trees in the market place. Every single mango tree had blooming Foxtail Orchids! Despite the fact that the orchids were commonplace, because they were high up in the trees, we had missed seeing them!



As we walked along the road, we found that not only mango, but other trees such as *Jacaranda* and *Albizzia sp.* were adorned by flowering orchids. We noticed that only

the smooth-barked *Eucalyptus* was not decorated by pretty orchids. We wondered about this. Anchal surmised-the bark of the Eucalyptus peels off, not so with the other trees, hence the orchids cannot grow on *Eucalyptus*. The orchid had obviously put some thought behind the trees that it selects to grow on!

The Foxtail Orchid *Rhynchosyilis retusa*, is an orchid that grows in moist forested areas in the western Ghats, north east India and the Himalayas and blossoms during the monsoons. However, as we observed in Dehradun, they often spread into cities. I have seen them in the outskirts of Pune, where we lived.

The inflorescence of the Foxtail Orchid consists of a cluster of up to a hundred flowers, which can be white or pink. Its inflorescence looks like the bushy tail of the fox, hence its common name. Each flower consists of three petals, the base of which is purple spotted. The flower grows out of a cluster of thick belt-like green leaves. The Foxtail Orchid, like other orchids, is an epiphyte. Epiphytes are plants that grow on other plants (mainly trees), but make their own food, hence are not parasites. In dense tropical evergreen forests, often sunlight does not penetrate the dense canopy. Hence plants like the orchids, give themselves a leg up, by growing high up on trees, thereby increasing the chances of receiving sunlight, so critical for them to make food through photosynthesis. There are, of course, ground orchids, that do not grow on trees, but in open spaces, and hence no longer require a leg up!

Amidst the cluster of the flowers and leaves, I noticed that the orchid's brown roots hung loose around the tree trunk, waving in the breeze. As the orchid does not grow on soil, it has evolved other strategies for survival. The roots gain nourishment from the decaying leaves and moss that cluster around the orchid. In addition, the roots can also absorb atmospheric moisture.

The Foxtail Orchid is the state flower of Arunachal Pradesh and in Assam, it is called *Kapau phool*, and is used in marriages as a bridal decoration. Orchids are well known as ornamental plants, often with lovely fragrances. However, they are not easy to grow and require a great deal of care. I know quite a few people lovingly nurture orchids in their homes, much as you and I would keep a pet! Orchids has other uses- the vanilla essence, used in ice creams and cooking is extracted from the fruit of the orchid *Vanilla planifolia*.

Two weeks later, the orchids have dried up. We walked along the road, peering up every tree (notwithstanding the queer looks we got from passer-byes...who are these weirdo's peering up trees!). All that remained of the gorgeous pink flowers were shriveled up brown leaves, hanging forlornly from the tree trunks. Waiting for the next monsoon, so as to adorn the bare tree trunks once again.

© Sanjay Sondhi

Photograph caption: Flowering Foxtail Orchid