

Native Orchid of the Month—January

Listera australis

(southern twayblade)

The earliest blooming of our native orchids is a rarely seen species, *Listera australis*, the southern twayblade. It is so small as to be easily overlooked in the moist woodlands that it calls home. It is found in both moist pineland bogs and moist hardwood forests across much of Louisiana. Twayblades emerge from early January to July in Louisiana, but later as you travel northward through their range which extends all the way into the southern parts of Canada. Frequently they occur in association with rhizomes of the cinnamon fern (*Osmunda cinnamomea*.)



The plant is usually no more than three inches tall, occasionally up to six inches, with a pair of leaves (hence the common name) that are seldom more than a half-inch long. If you are fortunate to find a plant, don't look away, lest you spend another five to ten minutes relocating it. Seedlings consist of only the stem and the pair of leaves, while mature plants will have a flower stem arising from between their leaves. Usually about 10 flowers occur on the stem. The flowers are a wonder of miniaturization, with petals and sepals only about 1 mm long in which many of the floral parts are composed of literally just a few hundred cells. The forked lip is by far the most conspicuous part of the flower, reaching



lengths of about a half-inch.

This is one of Louisiana's smallest orchids. They come up rather quickly, set seed and senesce all within the period of a month to a month-and-a-half some time from January to July.

