

ARCHIVES OF THE LIVING
UNITED KINGDOM

How much memory does a plant carry?

Ruth Mateus-Berr
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NOTE ON THE RESEARCH

The research underlying this catalogue arose from the artist's personal curiosity and was supplemented and expanded with the help of ChatGPT during the working process. Botanical, ecological, historical, mythological, medical and pharmacological sources were consulted alongside cultural-historical traditions and personal associations.

The information compiled here makes no claim to scientific completeness or freedom from error and is provided without warranty. Historical plant names, mythological traditions and medical attributions in particular cannot always be clearly related to present-day botanical species and scientific knowledge.

The research is therefore not intended as a scientific reference work, but as part of the artistic process of *Archives of the Living*. It makes visible the paths the artist follows from a plant: from a botanical peculiarity to a historical source, from a name to a myth, from an active substance to a memory, or from an ecological relationship to an unexpected cultural connection.

This openness is intentional. The texts are intended to make it possible to trace how curiosity becomes research and research becomes a *Florilegical Narration*. Above all, however, they aim to encourage readers to keep asking questions, reading, disagreeing and discovering connections – and to become infected by curiosity about the stories and relationships of plants.

MEADOW CLARY

Salvia pratensis L.



BOTANY

Salvia pratensis belongs to the mint family (*Lamiaceae*) and is native to large parts of Europe. This perennial grows in nutrient-poor meadows, dry grasslands and sunny slopes on calcareous soils. Its violet-blue flowers appear between May and July and, through their sophisticated pollination mechanism, are particularly adapted to wild bees and bumblebees. When an insect enters the flower, the stamens move like a lever and transfer pollen precisely onto the pollinator's body – an example of the high degree of specialisation in plant evolution.

HISTORY

The name *Salvia* derives from the Latin *salvare* – to heal or preserve – and points to the esteem in which the genus has been held for thousands of years. As early as antiquity, Greek and Roman authors described various sage species as valuable medicinal plants. In the Middle Ages, they were among the most important plants in monastery gardens and were documented in numerous herbals.

While common sage (*Salvia officinalis*) acquired far greater medical significance, meadow clary remained above all a component of semi-natural meadow landscapes. Today it is also regarded as an indicator of species-rich cultural landscapes whose diversity is closely connected with traditional forms of land management.

MAGIC AND MYTH

Since antiquity, sage has been regarded as a symbol of wisdom, health and longevity. Its name connects healing with preservation and thus points to an understanding of nature that links care and knowledge. Although this symbolism relates primarily to *Salvia officinalis*, culturally it extends to the genus as a whole. Meadow clary also recalls Europe's historic cultural landscapes. Flower-rich meadows developed over centuries through the interplay of human care and natural processes. Their disappearance makes clear that biodiversity does not depend solely on untouched nature, but often also on sustainable forms of coexistence between people and landscape.

MEDICINE

Unlike common sage, *Salvia pratensis* is only rarely used medicinally. Historically, the species was occasionally used regionally as a substitute for other sage species; these uses, however, should not be equated with a modern, clinically established medicinal application.

PHARMACY

Salvia pratensis also contains essential oils, tannins and phenolic compounds. Pharmacological research and established monographs, however, focus much more strongly on *Salvia officinalis*. Phytochemical similarity should therefore not be equated with identical medicinal usability.

IMAGE ANALYSIS

Against the deep black background, *Salvia pratensis* rises in warm gradations of Naples yellow. The upright inflorescences structure the composition through their rhythmic verticality, while the tiered bilabiate flowers create a subtle alternation of repetition and variation. The reduced palette directs attention to the architecture of the plant and makes its characteristic growth form the true carrier of the image's effect.

Like several plants in the series, meadow clary stands in a strikingly small glass vase. The vessel can barely contain the plant's height and spread and seems ill-suited to its growth form. This creates a moment of subtle instability: the long inflorescence leans slightly to the left, as though balance were being renegotiated at every moment. The vase becomes not merely a container, but an image of a limitation exceeded by living growth.

It is precisely this tension between vessel and plant that shapes the composition. While the vase promises stability, the plant develops a dynamic that escapes this order. The fragile balance creates the impression of a fleeting moment – as if growth were stronger than the form attempting to contain it.

The regularly arranged flowers form an ornamental rhythm unfolding along the inclined stem. The ornament does not arise as a decorative element; rather, it develops from the morphology of the plant itself. Repetition and variation combine into a structure that appears both botanically precise and pictorially condensed.

The black ground finally opens a space of memory in which the plant detaches itself from its concrete surroundings. Between the small vase, the gentle inclination of the inflorescence and the rhythmic order of the flowers, a quiet balance emerges between support and movement, limitation and unfolding. The composition makes visible that growth can never be fully controlled. It always exceeds the forms that try to hold it fast.

FLORILEGICAL NARRATION

While painting meadow clary, I was less concerned with its historical significance as a medicinal plant than with its extraordinary relationship to other living beings. Each flower is part of a finely tuned system that could not exist without pollinators. The plant reminds us that development never happens in isolation, but always arises through relationships.

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SNAKE'S-HEAD FRITILLARY

Fritillaria meleagris L.



BOTANY

The snake's-head fritillary or chequered fritillary (*Fritillaria meleagris* L.) belongs to the lily family (*Liliaceae*). From a bulb it develops a slender stem with narrow, grey-green leaves and usually a single, downward-hanging, bell-shaped flower. Six similar-looking tepals form a striking bell whose purple-red to brown-violet surface is crossed by paler fields. This creates the regular chequerboard pattern that gave the plant its German name.

It is tied to wet meadows, floodplain areas and high groundwater levels. This very dependence makes it sensitive to changes in the water regime.

In Austria, it is among the rarest plants in this series. The Red List of Ferns and Flowering Plants of Austria lists it as CR – Critically Endangered. Natural Austrian populations are concentrated in eastern Styria and southern Burgenland. In Burgenland, occurrences are found particularly near Hagensdorf and Luisling; in Styria, the snake's-head fritillary meadow at Großsteinbach is an important site. A historical occurrence in Upper Austria has already disappeared. The snake's-head fritillary thus becomes an especially precise indicator of ecological change: if the groundwater level falls or wet meadows are drained, it disappears.

Fritillaria meleagris has declined sharply in the United Kingdom and is now largely confined to a small number of traditional wet hay meadows and floodplain meadows. The principal cause is the loss of these habitats, particularly through drainage and agricultural intensification. Plantlife and The Wildlife Trusts list the species as Vulnerable. Its formal status is complex, however, because its native status in Great Britain is disputed. The Botanical Society of Britain and Ireland (BSBI) removed it from the British Red List after it was no longer classified as originally native, but as a historical introduction.

HISTORY

The scientific species name *meleagris* refers to the guinea fowl (*Meleagris*), whose spotted plumage Linnaeus apparently associated with the flower's pattern. The German names Schachbrettblume, Schachblume and Kiebitzei likewise arise from seeing: people translate the plant's unusual surface into familiar images. Its Austrian history is also a history of traditional cultural landscapes. At Großsteinbach it was able to survive in extensively managed meadows. Drainage, intensive fertilisation and changes in land management, by contrast, threaten its population. The Province of Styria explicitly points out that traditional forms of management are essential for its continued existence.

MAGIC AND MYTH

In the snake's-head fritillary, the strongest cultural narrative lies less in a clearly identifiable ancient myth than in its extraordinary pattern. The flower seems to possess something we normally attribute to humans: a geometric design. Nature suddenly appears constructed. The grid, one of the most elementary human systems of order, is found on a living flower. Here too, caution is required with Dioscorides. In *De materia medica*, Pedanius Dioscorides describes various lilies and bulbous plants; however, none of these historical plants can be securely equated with the modern species *Fritillaria meleagris*.

MEDICINE

The snake's-head fritillary is not a medicinal plant for self-treatment. Species of the genus *Fritillaria* contain biologically active alkaloids; at the same time, plant parts such as the bulb in particular may contain toxic substances. Historical or pharmacological studies of other *Fritillaria* species must therefore not be transferred uncritically to *Fritillaria meleagris*.

PHARMACY

Within the genus *Fritillaria* there is an extensive field of pharmacological research, particularly on steroidal alkaloids. This does not mean, however, that the Austrian snake's-head fritillary is an established medicinal drug. Phytochemical relatedness is not the same as medicinal usability.

IMAGE ANALYSIS

Hardly any other plant in the Austrian series connects nature and ornament so directly. The chequerboard pattern seems to dissolve the boundary between organic growth and human design. The flower appears at once natural and artificial, alive and constructed. This is precisely the paradox: a plant with an almost impossible-to-overlook appearance can nearly disappear entirely from a landscape.

The pattern thus becomes an order on an endangered surface. With a movement, it seems to lift a curtain and at the same time become part of it. Perhaps it was only the wingbeat of the butterfly above it. It stands in a glass vase on draped fabric that itself forms an ornament and incorporates a fallen flower.

FLORILEGICAL NARRATION

The image therefore asks a simple question: What use is the most perfect order on a flower when the conditions of its life fall out of order?

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WELSH MUDWORT

Limosella australis R.Br.



BOTANY

Limosella australis belongs to the plantain family (*Plantaginaceae*). This small, low-growing plant inhabits open, wet and periodically flooded mud and sand surfaces, especially in coastal habitats. Its inconspicuous, pale flowers sit close above the substrate; the narrow to spatulate leaves arise from a basal rosette. The dynamics of the habitat are crucial to its survival: flooding, the retreat of water and newly exposed open ground create the short-lived niches in which the species can persist.

This close association with unstable transition zones makes the plant sensitive to coastal development, changes in hydrology, nutrient inputs and the loss of open mud surfaces. Its rarity is therefore shaped less by a spectacular appearance than by the fragility of a highly specialised habitat.

Limosella australis is a very rare and locally distributed species in the United Kingdom, with British occurrences concentrated particularly in Wales. It inhabits intertidal mudflats and pools in salt marshes and is therefore tied to highly specialised and sensitive coastal habitats. Its formal conservation status is complex: because of doubts about its indigenous status, the species was excluded from the British Red List and placed on the so-called “Waiting List”. While British Red List assessments discuss the possibility that it was introduced, the Royal Botanic Gardens, Kew, list Great Britain as part of its native range. The species is therefore exceptionally rare and of conservation relevance in Great Britain, although it cannot currently be assigned an unequivocal regular British Red List threat category.

HISTORY

The generic name *Limosella* derives from the Latin *limus* – mud – and directly describes the habitat. The name thus preserves an old form of botanical observation: the plant is remembered not through beauty or usefulness, but through the ground on which it appears.

MAGIC AND MYTH

There is no pronounced mythological tradition associated with mudwort. Yet this very absence is revealing. While conspicuous flowers have been charged for centuries with legends, healing powers or symbols, small plants of mudflats often remain almost culturally invisible. Their history is a history of being overlooked.

MEDICINE

No established medicinal use is known for *Limosella australis*. The plant should therefore not be interpreted medicinally on the basis of historical analogies or uses of related species.

PHARMACY

There is no established pharmaceutical use or medicinal monograph. Its significance lies primarily in biodiversity, habitat protection and ecological indicator function.

IMAGE ANALYSIS

Limosella australis appears against a deep black background as an almost otherworldly, fragile being. The plant grows from a dark, squat vessel whose compact form stands in marked contrast to the long, narrow leaves. They spread in every direction, overlap and curve, and seem almost to escape the confined space of the vessel. The reduced palette of black, grey, white and muted Naples yellow reinforces the graphic character of the composition. The pale, ribbon-like leaves trace animated lines into the dark pictorial space. Some descend as far as the tabletop, while others reach far beyond the vessel. The result is less the image of an upright, presented plant than of an organism tentatively feeling its way into space. A tension emerges between the small, dark centre and the plant's almost uncontrolled expansion: the vessel seems to hold and contain it, while its growth exceeds this boundary in every direction. The plant appears both vulnerable and wilful. The surface beneath the plant is a table. Yet its irregular markings also evoke mud, watercourses or a mapped landscape. Reality and association overlap: the table becomes an imaginary topography into which the natural habitat of *Limosella australis* seems to inscribe itself. As a plant of unstable transition zones between water and land, it therefore also occupies no unequivocally fixed place within the image. To the left of the plant appears a mudskipper – an amphibious fish that itself exists between water and land. Its presence intensifies the motif of transition: plant and animal share not only an association with mud and water, but embody different forms of life between the elements. The result is a portrait of the in-between. *Limosella australis* asserts itself not through monumentality or conspicuous flowers, but through its fragile, almost searching expansion. The mudskipper extends this narrative through a second living being that resists clear categorisation. Precisely what is small, unspectacular and easily overlooked takes up space in the image.

FLORILEGICAL NARRATION

While painting *Limosella australis*, I became increasingly interested in its life at a boundary that is not really a fixed boundary at all. It grows where water comes and disappears again, where mud is neither entirely land nor entirely water, and where conditions are constantly changing. Its long, searching leaves seem to absorb this uncertainty into the image: they leave the small vessel, reach into the space and seek their own path. The table unexpectedly becomes a landscape. Its lines evoke watercourses, sediments or a map on which boundaries are not fixed but constantly redrawn. To the left appears a mudskipper. It, too, lives between the elements, in water and on land. Plant and animal thus meet in a shared capacity: they have not chosen one side, but have developed their existence precisely in transition. Perhaps this is the essential narrative of *Limosella australis*: life does not always require stability. Sometimes it emerges precisely where something fluctuates, recedes, returns and rearranges itself. The in-between is not an empty space. It can be a highly specialised habitat – provided we allow it to remain.

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GHOST ORCHID

Dendrophylax lindenii (Lindl.) Benth. ex Rolfe



BOTANY

Dendrophylax lindenii belongs to the orchid family (*Orchidaceae*). This epiphytic species is almost leafless. What may appear to be the absence of a plant is in fact a radical shift in its architecture: a network of flat, grey-green roots performs a substantial part of photosynthesis and adheres directly to the bark of the host tree. The stem is strongly reduced and barely visible among the roots.

During flowering, a slender inflorescence rises from this root body. The white to cream-coloured flower has a deeply divided lip with long, narrow extensions and an exceptionally long nectar spur. In the half-light of the swamp forest it seems to hover in front of the trunk – hence the English name Ghost Orchid. The flowers are especially fragrant at night.

The natural range of *Dendrophylax lindenii* lies in southern Florida and Cuba. The species grows in humid tropical to subtropical forest and swamp habitats. Its existence is closely bound to suitable host

trees, high humidity, intact forest structures, pollinators and symbiotic fungi. The orchid is therefore less an autonomous individual than a visible node in a complex ecological network.

In Great Britain, it exists only in artificially controlled environments such as botanical gardens.

HISTORY

The Ghost Orchid was scientifically described in the nineteenth century and named after the Belgian-Luxembourgish plant collector Jean Jules Linden. Its rarity, the difficult-to-access swamp habitats and its apparently bodiless, floating flower later made it one of North America's best-known orchids.

In the United Kingdom, the species acquired a particular cultural-historical connection in 2023: at the Royal Botanic Gardens, Kew, a Florida Ghost Orchid flowered for the first time in the United Kingdom. The presentation explicitly linked fascination with an extraordinary plant to questions of species conservation and habitat loss.

MAGIC AND MYTH

The name Ghost Orchid almost inevitably creates a narrative of appearance and disappearance. The plant has no leaves, the flower visually detaches itself from the dark trunk, and its scent unfolds at night. The "ghostly" quality is therefore not a botanical property but a human figure of perception: we name what we can see only partially through images of the invisible.

The generic name *Dendrophylax* – roughly "tree guardian" – reinforces this idea. The roots lie closely against the host tree as though embracing it. In language, botanical dependence becomes a relationship of protection, proximity and guardianship.

MEDICINE

There is no established medicinal use for *Dendrophylax lindenii*. Because of its rarity and protected status, removal from natural populations would also be incompatible with conservation goals.

PHARMACY

The Ghost Orchid is not an established medicinal drug. Its scientific significance lies far more in orchid biology, pollination ecology, mycorrhizal research, ex situ cultivation and conservation than in pharmacy.

IMAGE ANALYSIS

The Ghost Orchid radically challenges the traditional idea of a plant. Almost everything by which we ordinarily recognise a plant – leaf mass, an upright stem, a clearly bounded body – seems to be absent. Instead, what becomes visible are roots, attachment, dependence and, for a short time, a white flower.

It is precisely this reduction that makes the motif particularly apt for *Archives of the Living*. The plant does not appear as an isolated botanical portrait, but as a relationship: to the tree, moisture, fungi, pollinators, darkness and time. The flower appears as an event within an otherwise almost invisible system.

FLORILEGICAL NARRATION

The Ghost Orchid carries memory not in leaves or a visible stem, but in relationships. It exists by attaching itself, exchanging, waiting and appearing for a short time. Its apparent disappearance is not non-being. It is another form of presence. In the context of *Archives of the Living*, it thus becomes a plant of the invisible: it asks how much of a living system we must perceive before we assign meaning to it – and what happens if we respond only to the spectacular appearance of the flower while the fragile network that makes it possible has long been endangered.

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