



Central Jersey Orchid Society Newsletter

January 2026 Issue

President's Message

As we wrap up another great year for the Central Jersey Orchid Society, it's the perfect time to reflect, say thank you, and get excited about what's coming next — preferably while admiring a well-bloomed plant and pretending we *meant* for that last one to spike late.

2025 marked my first year as President, and it has truly been an honor. Stepping into this role gave me an even greater appreciation for what makes this society thrive: passionate members, generous volunteers, and an impressive ability to grow orchids that behave beautifully... at least in public.

Looking ahead to 2026, I couldn't be more optimistic. Our North Jersey Orchid Show display committee is already in full swing, and with the talent, creativity, and dedication behind it, I have no doubt the display will be a success. If enthusiasm alone counted as fertilizer, we'd be well ahead of schedule.

Most importantly, I want to thank **all** of our members. Whether you're designing displays, helping behind the scenes, sharing advice, or simply showing up with great plants and good stories, you are the reason this club continues to flourish year after year.

Here's to another year of stunning displays, learning from each other, celebrating successes (and laughing off the occasional orchid mishap), and continuing to grow together. I'm looking forward to everything 2026 has in store for the Central Jersey Orchid Society.

Warm regards,

Chris Bevins

President, Central Jersey Orchid Society

Central Jersey orchid Society El Presidente



Ghost Orchid
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Meeting Location

Trinity Church 33 Mercer St,
Princeton, NJ 08540-6893

Meetings and Events 2023

Arrive at 6:30.

Meeting will start at 7:00PM

Meetings are held the **Third Thursday**
of the month.

November: Nicholas Rust (RustyExotics)
on Habenaria Orchids

December 2024: Holiday Party

January 15: Q& A Our Panel of Experts
to answer your orchid growing
questions

February: Carlos Macku - TBA

March: Leon Glicenstein
Glicensteins Monsters

April: Beth Davis - TBA

May: TBA

June: CJOs Picnic

Officers and Committees:

President – Chris Bevins

Vice President – George Wallace

Treasurer/Membership – Matt Pagano

Corresponding/Recording
Secretary –Danielle Gordon

Editor Newsletter - Ed Frankel
CJOsnewsletter@gmail.com

George Wallace – Web Master

Jeff Tyron – CJOs Photographer

Holiday Party – (No Show Table This Month) (Good Food and Good Friends)







Upcoming Webinars



Greenhouse Chat February 2026

Ron McHatton



Tuesday, February 10th, 2026
8:30 PM – 9:30 PM EST

Join Dr. Ron McHatton as he answers your questions about all things orchids. Please send your question and pictures to Sandra Svoboda at greenhousechat@aos.org by February 7, 2026.



The World of Phragmipediums: What Can Nature Teach Us? – Part 2

Frank Cervera



Wednesday, January 14th, 2026
8:30 PM EST

The World of Phragmipediums: What Can Nature Teach Us? – Part 2 continues the exploration of the fascinating Phragmipedium orchids.

Go to [AOS.org](https://www.aos.org) for Webinar links and information on orchid culture and care. While you are visiting their site, please join AOS. Support this worthy no profit organization.

Chasing rare beauty

Poachers brave dangerous Florida swamps for imperiled ghost orchid

By Rylan Digiacomo-Rapp • Fresh Take Florida



Nearly impossible to see, a large ghost orchid, or possibly a group of multiple, lives near the left fork of a bald cypress tree high in the canopy of Audubon's Corkscrew Swamp Sanctuary on Sept. 22. **RYLAN DIGIACOMO-RAPP/FRESH TAKE FLORIDA PHOTOS**

NAPLES — The poachers weren't intimidated by heat, lightning, mosquitos, venomous snakes, alligators or losing their way in the South Florida swamps. They were there to steal the ghost orchid, a plant so elusive it's likened to an Everglades apparition.

The ghost, native to only Florida and Cuba, is a leafless web of roots splayed on the trunks of native trees. It's also taxing to find, but the orchid's ribbon-like white bloom makes the dangerous trek well worth it — especially for those drawn to rarity.

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service estimated there are less than 1,000 ghost orchids left in the United States. The agency proposed the ghost for listing under the Endangered Species Act earlier this year, a potential addition to its state protected status.

The flower was the subject of the 1998 non-fiction book "The Orchid Thief: A True Story of Beauty and Obsession" by Susan Orlean, a chronicle of how a Florida plant dealer's infatuation with the ghost put it on the map for collectors — and poachers.

Government estimates show the ghost population declining in almost all 12 protected areas listed between Florida and Cuba, only one population count being unknown. With the species under siege by poaching, researchers have labored to keep the exact location of its fragmented habitats secret.

Pinched by poachers

In the three decades Mike Owen was a park biologist for Fakahatchee Strand Preserve State Park in southwest Florida, he grew familiar with the grit it takes to track down a ghost.

Fakahatchee Strand, widely considered the orchid capital of the United States, is one of the largest strand swamps in the world, a linear wetland southeast of Naples stretching about 20 miles long. Water is key to the ecosystem, which fluctuates dramatically between the rainy and dry seasons.

Owen spoke of the strand and its ghost orchids with fascination, his sentences rapid and pitched high in excitement: This was a man who utterly loved his job. Though the ghost orchid's bloom is an "incredible, sensual, charismatic" flower in deep contrast with the swamp, Owen said it's otherwise camouflaged, near impossible to detect.

During the summer months, Owen said traversing the strand in search of a ghost could mean wading through waist-deep, murky water in the middle of alligator mating season. But in the mind of a poacher, he said danger doesn't seem to matter — and Owen would know.

Orlean's "The Orchid Thief" detailed John Laroche's theft of numerous protected plant species from the Fakahatchee Strand, three of which were mature ghosts, Owen said. He served as the author's Fakahatchee guide, and when Laroche was required by law to return what he stole, Owen brought the ghosts back into the swamp himself.

The orchids can be purchased online for around \$50 to \$200. It's not clear whether prices on the black market may be higher for orchids that buyers perceive to be more rare or pure.

Laroche was obsessed with cloning and selling the flowers for profit and personal fulfillment. There's value in harvesting an orchid's seeds to grow more, but a mature ghost stolen from the wild wouldn't survive long, Owen said.

"There must be a market out there just to have a ghost orchid in bloom because they all know it's not going to live," he said.

He witnessed others go missing during the remainder of his career, too.

Even for a seasoned park biologist like Owen — who retired in 2023 — it took about three years and much trekking to get a headcount on the strand's known ghost population since 1993. The endangered species proposal lists it as about 230, but the exact number is unknown.

Owen kept tabs on a ghost for almost a decade until it disappeared in 2005, the first in a string of thefts. Two more were stolen just before a tropical storm the following year. Then, another three disappeared in 2007. They were all taken during the summer rainy season, when he said park biologists wouldn't be heavily monitoring.

The endangered species proposal said 10 had been pinched from the Fakahatchee by 2020, which could represent around 8% of the strand's known ghosts. A poacher was caught there as recently as two years ago, and the site remains at high risk of more attempts.

Ghost Orchid continued on next page

"They're just trying to make a buck and get it free," Owen said, his tone suddenly harsh. "Once the ghost orchid is listed federally, now it won't be taken lightly."

Before the government's latest proposal, the ghost orchid was designated only as a protected species by Florida. The maximum penalty for a first-time offender was about a \$500 fine and possible prison time. Under the new federal guidelines, a criminal misdemeanor under the Endangered Species Act could bring fines of \$50,000 and up to one year in prison.

To unnerve poachers, Owen installed trail cameras and moved them sporadically for a year. He refrained from showing park guests the strand's mature ghosts, only revealing the location of young, non-flowering plants unpalatable to poachers.

"We don't just make it easy for people to find it," he said. "We do have to kind of keep that secret because you just never know."

Though the species' life history is still under study, researchers know it's slow growing. Owen said he watched two ghosts in the wild since they were the size of "a parentheses on a printed page," and it took both upwards of 15 years to reach adulthood.

Since the ghost is so long-lived, only the older plants are capable of reproducing to save the species. They're also the most attractive to poachers looking to nab something pretty.

The ghost in decline

Adam Herdman, a University of Florida environmental horticulture doctoral candidate, has also seen first hand just how much time the species needs to grow.

With six months' worth of state and federal permits in hand, Herdman said he ventures into protected areas like the Florida Panther National Wildlife Refuge, also in southwest Florida, every few months to collect data and, in special cases, ghost orchid seeds.

The researchers usually park off the side of a stretch of Interstate 75 known as Alligator Alley and walk down an abandoned logging tram platform. From there, they're at the mercy of the swamp. Herdman recounted the looming threat of territorial alligators and lightning strikes, which he said made him scramble up a tree and "hang out with the orchids" more than once.

Herdman can then safely return to his UF lab, where thousands of dust-like seeds are given a chance to germinate in petri dishes. His most recent study concerns pinpointing their ideal temperature window.

He said the viability of those seeds is consistently low.

The ghost is picky. It relies on specific fungi and host trees — typically pond apple, pop ash and cypress — to germinate. Additional factors like constant humidity and the survival of its one pollinator, the sphinx moth, is key to maturity. In the wild, only half the ghost population is old enough to reproduce. Less than half of that is capable of releasing seeds each year, Herdman said.

Since beginning his study of natural ghost

populations in 2015, Herdman said most of his research centers on reintroducing seeds into the wild. He most recently brought young orchids back to the swamp around 2018, and as more baby ghosts germinate in his lab, he said another reintroduction could be possible within a couple years.

"People should be able to go out and look at these beautiful plants with their own eyes, but before we can trust them as practitioners and scientists, we need to know what's there," he said.

The ghost is more than just aesthetically pleasing. Its sensitivity to external conditions — everything from its partner fungi and host trees to its sphinx moth pollinators and wetland water flow — make it similar to a canary in a coal mine, Herdman said.

If something is wrong in the swamp, the ghost is the first to go.

A global curiosity

Boardwalk paths weave through Audubon's Corkscrew Swamp Sanctuary, southeast of Fort Myers and home of a "super" ghost orchid tucked high in the canopy of a bald cypress tree. Shawn Clem, the sanctuary's director of conservation, trekked a mile into the wilderness and stopped short, pointing into the distance.

Without a flower, the plant was nearly impossible to spot at first, even through the zoom lens of a camera. Leafless roots spidered from a central cluster clinging to the bald cypress' trunk, about 50 feet above the swamp's still water.

Because the "super" ghost is so large, researchers like Clem are unsure whether it's one or a group of multiple orchids. She said it's likely the only known ghost documented so high in the canopy. It's also attached to an old growth tree, another abnormality.

The Everglades was extensively logged during the 19th and 20th centuries, but Corkscrew trees managed to evade the axe. The "super" ghost's bald cypress could be upward of 500 years old, Clem said, a window into the orchid's natural habitat and behavior before human interference.

"It's not the only known ghost orchid that we have here at the sanctuary," she said. "It's the only one whose location we reveal."

The endangered species proposal said Corkscrew is home to two ghosts, but Clem said that's probably an underestimate considering how difficult they are to detect. Like the "super" ghost, it's possible more could be hiding unexpectedly high in the canopy of old growth trees.

"How old the plant is, we don't know," she said. Researchers think it could have been alive for more than four or five decades now. Since its discovery in 2007, the "super" ghost has managed to bloom at least once during every month of the year, drawing fascination from visitors.

About an hour south, Naples Botanical Garden Director of Collections Nicholas Ewy was preparing much smaller specimens for display. Like Herdman, he labors to grow ghosts from seeds collected in the wild.

"It's about some of the most advanced propagation you can do," he said. The whole process has to take place under sterile conditions.

In his lab, Ewy suspends the seeds in a nutrient solution. If even the smallest amount of bacteria, yeast or fungi invades a flask, the whole batch is ruined. There are hundreds in each, so he only needs a couple successes to produce more than enough plants for the garden.

The orchid propagation room was saturated with pink light, and petri dishes held the seedlings recently moved from flasks, which appeared merged into green and brown clumps. Once the young plants form roots, they're transferred to their own plastic cup to mature. The older ghosts were tucked into a corner, each a funnel-cake-like jumble of limbs.

The plants will eventually be nestled into burlap or strapped to wood planks in a greenhouse. One day, Ewy said they could even be zip tied to a cypress or pop ash tree around the garden's ghost orchid boardwalk.

The Naples Botanical Garden has acquired some orchids with vaguer origins from plant shows, which he calls their "curiosity plants." They live in the greenhouses behind the scenes and are occasionally shown to people when they bloom, but Ewy said those individuals would never be used for repopulation projects outside the garden, especially not for ghosts.

"You have no idea where it came from, if it's a hybrid, how it was collected, if there's any permits or anything," he said.

The rules are even stricter when it comes to crossing international borders. Ewy has helped transport plants, including ghost orchids, to the Chelsea Flower Show in London, England.

In 2023, he ensured a ghost on the cusp of blooming reached the show. He said reporters and camera crews were anxious for it to flower as he warmed it with heat packs during the chilly London summer.

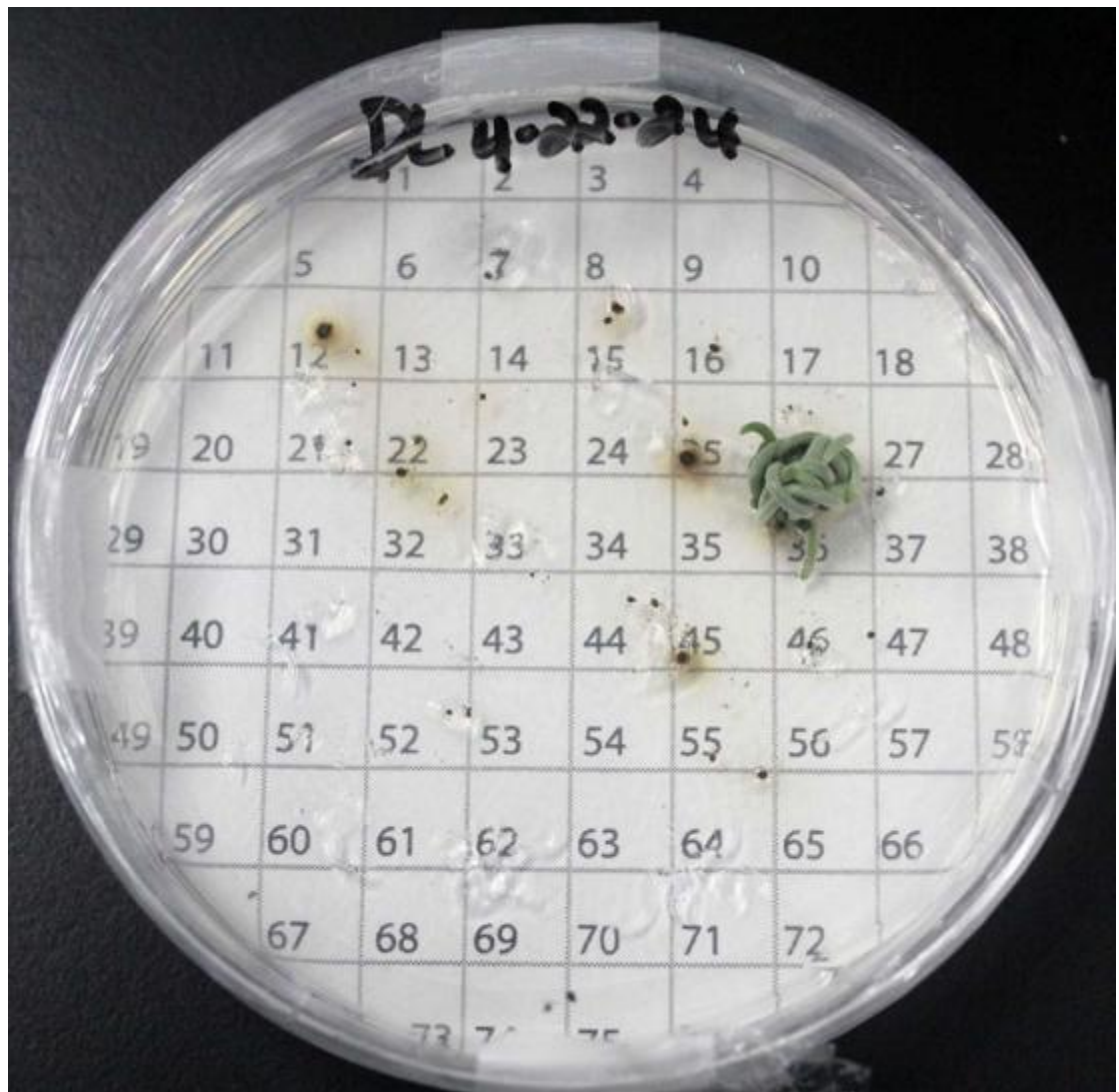
Lawrence Zettler, an Illinois College biology professor and Chicago Botanic Garden research associate, worked beside Ewy in London.

Zettler, a pioneer of an orchid research pipeline, recalled the public's awe after their ghost finally bloomed two days after the flower show — and the social media uproar that followed. While the species awaits a decision on its endangered species status in the United States, he said its image also endures across the globe.

"The whole world is watching about the ghost orchid," Zettler said.

This story was produced by Fresh Take Florida, a news service of the University of Florida College of Journalism and Communications. The reporter can be reached at rdigiacomorapp@freshtakeflorida.com.

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A baby ghost orchid spends its early life in a Petri dish in Adam Herdman's lab.

Beth Davis (Waldor Orchids)

Understanding Orchid Labels

