

# The Palmetto

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## *Delicate Ionopsis*

by Elizabeth Smith

Delicate ionopsis, *Ionopsis utricularioides*, is an epiphytic orchid often found growing on the sunlit outer branches of trees, sometimes dangling precariously by its roots. The genus name *Ionopsis* means "a violet appearance", borne out by the color of the heart-shaped lip. The species name *utricularioides* roughly translates to "resembling a little bladder", describing the small sac behind the lip created by the united lateral sepals.

This orchid was first described as an *Epidendrom* by Olaf Swartz in 1788 from a West Indian specimen. It was first recorded in Florida in 1904, collected by the famous orchidologist, Oakes Ames, and his wife, Blanche, who did many fine illustrations of his specimens. One account places the date as March 12; it must have been in bloom when they came across it at a site called Gobbler's Head, in Collier County near Naples.

*Ionopsis* has a delicate inflorescence of lavender to white flowers. The flowers are approximately 1/4-inch (6 mm) wide, the lip streaked with magenta or purple veins. The lip is prominent, serving as a landing area for pollinators, probably small bees. The flowers are borne on a loose pedicel above a reddish green stalk that emerges from the pseudobulb, which is usually concealed by the overlapping leaf bases. The thick, ribbed leaves, which spread fanlike above the fibrous roots, are 1/4 to 3/4 of an inch (6 to 19 mm) wide, 4 to 8 inches (10 to 20 cm) long, slightly cupped with sharp tips, and sometimes tinged with purple. The blooming season is listed as December to April; in south Florida *ionopsis* seems to bloom most frequently in the spring.

*Ionopsis* is habitat specific, preferring native growing conditions. Past collectors have found that attempted culture in typical orchid houses brings a decline. This species is on the Florida endangered list and is protected by law.

*Ionopsis utricularioides* reaches its northern range in Lee and Collier counties in Florida. Outside the U.S., it is found southward to Mexico, Central America, and Panama; throughout the West Indies, and into central South America; and on the Galapagos Islands.

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### REFERENCES

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<http://www.fnps.org/palmetto/v14i2p8smith.pdf> (19 October, 2002).

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