Microtis oligantha

COMMON NAMES
small onion orchid

BIOSTATUS
Native – Endemic taxon

CURRENT CONSERVATION STATUS
2023 | Not Threatened
Jump to previous conservation statuses

CATEGORY
Vascular

STRUCTURAL CLASS
Orchids

SIMPLIFIED DESCRIPTION
This green orchid rarely grows more than 150mm tall when flowering and can be very hard to see when it grows amongst other grassland vegetation. It is distinguishable from the other Microtis species by having a dorsal sepal with an obtuse, rather than acute, tip that is not upturned. From above, the dorsal sepal also often appears opaque. In addition, it has a squarish labellum and usually fewer than 10 flowers on a scape, all characteristics which help distinguish it from the other onion orchid species.

FLOWER COLOURS
Green

Kaukau, Wellington. Photographer: Jeremy R. Rolfe, Date taken: 06/01/2016, Licence: CC BY.

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DETAILED DESCRIPTION
Terrestrial, glabrous, fleshy, tuberous bright green to dark green perennial herb forming small colonies or occurring as solitary plants. Plants at flowering up to 150 mm tall. **Tubers** globose to ovoid. **Stem** erect, terete, fleshy. Leaf solitary, usually overtopping inflorescence (but often damaged and so falling short), bright green to dark green, rarely tinged with red near base, closely sheathing stem for much of length, linear-terete, hollow, up to 200 mm long. **Inflorescence** a loose raceme up to 30 × 5 mm. **Flowers** 1–10, up to 2.8 mm diameter, shortly-stalked mostly widely spaced. **Perianth** green, segments up to 1.8 mm long, widely spreading, thick and fleshy. **Dorsal sepal** 2.5 mm long, broadly ovate, erect or projecting forwards, cucullate, concave, column-embracing, apex and margins rounded (without recurved apex), smaller than ovary at flowering. **Lateral sepals** much shorter, narrower, mostly acute to subacute, strongly deflexed, apices straight. **Petals** shorter again, broadly to narrowly obtuse, erect, mostly hidden under dorsal sepal. **Labellum** sessile, up to 2.0 mm long, green or yellow-green, oblong, slightly narrowed at mid-length; apex bluntly truncate rarely slightly emarginate, not apiculate; margin papillose, shallowly crenate, often thickened, rarely undulate; anterior callus variously developed, verrucose, rather irregular, often raised on a rounded ridge; basal calli conspicuous, dark green, tabular-ovoid to tabular, usually continuous at sides with narrow band of callus behind a transverse, slit-like (not pouched) furrow; labellum sharply deflexed, pendulous aligned more or less parallel to the ovary. **Column** short, obtuse, base of column mostly broader than stigma, wings mostly membranous throughout. **Anther** terminal, erect, situated above stigma, hemispherical, pollinia spheroidal, pollen granular. **Stigma** broadly ovate; rostellum ovate **Capsules** broadly ovoid, ovoid-ellipsoid, brown when ripe.

SIMILAR TAXA
Usually smaller than the other species of *Microtis* and with fewer flowers (up to 10). This species is best recognised by the obtuse rather than acute dorsal sepal whose apex is not upturned, and by the short-oblong to almost quadrate labellum with only shallowly crenate or rarely undulate margins. The labellum calli are indistinct and tabular.

DISTRIBUTION
Endemic. New Zealand: North Island, South Island, Chatham Islands.

HABITAT
Damp places in tussock grassland, on lake, tarn, river and wetland margins. Coastal to subalpine. Mainly montane to subalpine in the North Island, descending to sea level in the South and Chatham Islands

GENUS
Microtis

FAMILY
Orchidaceae

AUTHORITY
Microtis oligantha L.B.Moore

SYNONYMS
None (first described in 1967)

TAXONOMIC NOTES
Chatham Island plants tend to be much larger than those seen on the other New Zealand islands.

ENDEMIC TAXON
Yes

ENDEMIC GENUS
No

ENDEMIC FAMILY
No

FLOWERING
December–March

FRUITING
March–May

PROPAGATION TECHNIQUE
Easily grown in a damp sunny position. Should not be removed from the wild.

WETLAND PLANT INDICATOR STATUS RATING
FAC: Facultative
Commonly occurs as either a hydrophyte or non-hydrophyte (non-wetlands).

PLANT OF THE MONTH
This plant has been featured as a Plant of the Month – see Trilepidea: NZPCN newsletter for February 2025 for the full story.

ETYMOLOGY
microtis: Tiny eared
oligantha: Few-flowered

MANAAKI WHENUA ONLINE INTERACTIVE KEY
Key to native orchids of New Zealand

NVS CODE
MICOLI

CHROMOSOME NUMBER
2n = 44

PREVIOUS CONSERVATION STATUSES
2017 | Not Threatened
2012 | Not Threatened
2009 | Not Threatened
2004 | Not Threatened
Jump to current conservation status

REGIONAL CONSERVATION STATUSES
Otago: 2025 | Regionally Not Threatened Help
The regional threat classification system leverages off the national assessments in the NZTCS, providing information relevant for the regional context. Otago conservation status information is sourced from the "Conservation Status of Indigenous Vascular Plants in Otago, 2025" Jarvie S et al. (2025) report.

REFERENCES AND FURTHER READING
Moore LB, Edgar E. 1970. Flora of New Zealand, Volume II. Indigenous Tracheophyta: Monocotyledones except Gramineae. Government Printer, Wellington, NZ. 354 p.

ATTRIBUTION
Fact Sheet prepared for NZPCN by P.J. de Lange 14 April 2007. Description adapted from Moore and Edgar (1970). Some of this factsheet information is derived from Flora of New Zealand Online and is used under a Creative Commons Attribution 3.0 New Zealand licence.

MORE INFORMATION
https://www.nzpcn.org.nz/flora/species/microtis-oligantha/

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25 May 2026