

Thelymitra carnea

COMMON NAMES

pink sun orchid, early sun orchid

BIOSTATUS

Native – Endemic taxon

CURRENT CONSERVATION STATUS

2023 | Not Threatened | Qualifiers: SO

[Jump to previous conservation statuses](#)

CATEGORY

Vascular

STRUCTURAL CLASS

Orchids

FLOWER COLOURS

Cream, Red/Pink

DETAILED DESCRIPTION

Terrestrial, tuberous, glabrous, late winter to early summer-green perennial herb, either solitary or in well-spaced groups. Plants mostly reddish-green, at flower 100–300 mm tall. **Leaf** solitary, wiry, distinctly flexuose, fleshy to subcoriaceous, 80–160 × 2.5–3.0 mm, dark green to reddish green, terete or semi-terete and shallowly channelled, apex often twisted, subacute, often frayed. **Inflorescence** a 1–8-flowered raceme.

Flowers widely spaced, 8–14 mm diameter, segments to 8 × 4 mm, mostly pink, rarely cream or pale lemon yellow with the sepals darker coloured than the petals, without spots or stripes, scarcely opening or not, if opening only slightly spreading. **Sepals and petals** alike, broadly oblong. **Labellum** very slightly smaller. **Column** to 4 mm long, cream to pale pink or dark pink; column arms obliquely erect, more or less ovate, thick, fleshy, margins crenate or toothed, rarely with a few small spheroidal glands, otherwise without further ornamentation or cilia; post-anther lobe almost as high as anther, erect, margins fleshy, unevenly thickened to very slightly cucullate, weakly notched, bright yellow. **Anther** not prominent.

SIMILAR TAXA

Not likely to be confused with any other indigenous species. This species is readily identified by the reddish colour of the stem and leaf, and the slender, zig-zagged (flexuose) terete to semi-terete leaf (usually with a twisted and distinctly frayed apex). The widely spaced mostly pink flowers which scarcely open, are also distinctive. While the small pink grading to yellow, scarcely hooded and notched column, and flattened, toothed column arms lacking cilia are also unusual in New Zealand *Thelymitra*.

DISTRIBUTION

Indigenous. New Zealand: North Island (mainly northern to about Taupo, local around the southern North Island, apparently absent in between), South Island (confined to the northern third, mainly in the west).



Te Pahi, Northland. Photographer: Jeremy R. Rolfe, Date taken: 25/09/2014, Licence: CC BY.



Old capsules, flower bud and spent flowers. Waitakere Range. Photographer: Jeremy R. Rolfe, Date taken: 22/10/2007, Licence: CC BY.

HABITAT

Coastal to montane (up to 700 m a.s.l.). Mostly at low elevations and favouring open clay pans, consolidated sand hollows, and geothermal ground. Sometimes on the margins of peat bogs. Most often in gumland scrub or other semi-permanent shrubland habitats where it is especially abundant after fire.

THREATS

Not Threatened. However, it has declined from large parts of its range through habitat loss to taller forest or through urban development. Still abundant in the far north but if trends continue it may qualify in the not too distant future for a worse conservation status.

GENUS

Thelymitra

FAMILY

Orchidaceae

AUTHORITY

Thelymitra carnea Cheeseman

SYNONYMS

Thelymitra carnea var. *imberbis* (Hook.f.) Rupp et Hatch, *Thelymitra imberbis* Hook.f.

TAXONOMIC NOTES

Thelymitra carnea is based on an Australian type. Australian plants tend to be slightly larger than New Zealand forms and often have cream or reddish coloured flowers. Some people regard the New Zealand plant as endemic and use the name *T. imberbis* Hook.f. for it.

ENDEMIC TAXON

Yes

ENDEMIC GENUS

No

ENDEMIC FAMILY

No

FLOWERING

August–October

FRUITING

September–January

PROPAGATION TECHNIQUE

Difficult - should not be removed from the wild.

ETYMOLOGY

thelymitra: Woman's hat

carnea: From the Latin *carnus* 'flesh', meaning flesh-coloured

MANAAKI WHENUA ONLINE INTERACTIVE KEY

[Key to native orchids of New Zealand](#)

NVS CODE

THECAR

CHROMOSOME NUMBER

2n = 62

PREVIOUS CONSERVATION STATUSES

2017 | Not Threatened | Qualifiers: SO

2012 | Not Threatened

2009 | Not Threatened

2004 | Not Threatened

[Jump to current conservation status](#)

REGIONAL CONSERVATION STATUSES

Auckland: 2025 | Regionally At Risk – Regionally Declining | Qualifiers: DPR, DPS, DPT, EF, PF, RR, SO Help

The regional threat classification system leverages off the national assessments in the NZTCS, providing information relevant for the regional context. Auckland conservation status information is sourced from the [“Conservation status of vascular plant species in Tāmaki Makaurau / Auckland”](#) Simpkins E 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.

Rolfe JR, de Lange PJ. 2010. Illustrated guide to New Zealand sun orchids, *Thelymitra* (Orchidaceae). Jeremy Rolfe, Wellington, NZ. 57 p.

ATTRIBUTION

Fact Sheet prepared for NZPCN by Peter J. de Lange (14 April 2007). Description adapted from Moore Edgar (1970).

NZPCN FACT SHEET CITATION

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MORE INFORMATION

<https://www.nzpcn.org.nz/flora/species/thelymitra-carnea/>

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