Thelymitra pulchella

COMMON NAMES
striped sun orchid, beautiful sun orchid

BIOSTATUS
Native – Endemic taxon

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

CATEGORY
Vascular

STRUCTURAL CLASS
Orchids

FLOWER COLOURS
Blue, Red/Pink



Puketotara Block, Kerikeri. Photographer: Lisa Forester, Licence: CC BY-SA.



Column showing ciliate column arms and tuberculate post-anther lobe. Pinehaven, Upper Hutt. Photographer: Jeremy R. Rolfe, Date taken: 16/12/2007, Licence: CC BY.

DETAILED DESCRIPTION
Terrestrial, tuberous, glabrous, spring to summer-green perennial herb; found as solitary plants or growing in colonies of 4-many plants arising through vegetative extension. Plants at flower up to 800 mm tall. **Stem** robust, fleshy, erect, 2.5–4.8 mm diameter, yellow green to dark green (sometimes almost glaucous green). **Leaf** firmly fleshy to subcoriaceous, rather thick, erect to suberect, 80–240 × 6–20 mm, yellow-green, dark green to reddish green, channelled, deeply keeled and v-shaped in cross section. **Bracts** 2–4, foliaceous, closely sheathing, broadly to narrowly lanceolate, of similar colour to stems and leaves. **Inflorescence** a (1)–6–14-flowered raceme. **Flower** 10–18 mm diameter, segments usually blue or pink, rarely white, petals usually prominently striped with dark blue, sepals less markedly so; sometimes segments pink or blue without stripes. **Sepals and petals** similar, broadly ovate, lateral sepals slight narrower than the rest. **Labellum** slightly obovate. **Column** erect 6–8 mm tall, dark blue, pink, mauve, or white; post-anther lobe variable, mostly shorter than or equal to anther height, rarely taller; margins variable, usually thickened, sometimes slightly to prominently incurved, or irregularly denticulate and often tuberculate; usually dark orange, red-brown or red in the upper portion with the distal margins usually yellow; column-arms usually higher than anther, flat, red-brown to red, variably ornamented within a single raceme or population; most commonly with the margins thinly membranous, basally coloured red, toothed or lobed (anteriorly, posteriorly or both), the upper teeth grading into branched fimbriae, these extending to the top of the arm, or plain without ornamentation, or plain grading into teeth, or plain grading into fimbriae; teeth and fimbriae red, orange, yellow or in gradations between these.

SIMILAR TAXA
The prominently keeled, erect to suberect, rather thick and fleshy leaves are distinctive, while the usually striped flowers and rather variable, though usually reddish column arms of varying ornamentation are diagnostic of this species. It is most likely to be confused with *T. cyanea* (Lindl.) Benth. which differs by the absence of a post-anther lobe, and by its consistently ribbon-like, more or less spirally twisted, yellow column arms. It could also be confused with *T.* ×*dentata* L.B.Moore a sterile hybrid that differs by the less brightly-coloured, inconspicuous column-arm teeth that extend down the from margin of the column-arm wing; and yellow cilia held in globose masses.

DISTRIBUTION
Endemic. new Zealand: North Island, South Island, Stewart Island/Rakiura, Chatham Islands.

HABITAT
Widespread from coastal to montane areas (up to 800 m a.s.l.). Preferring open shrubland, clay plans and gumland vegetation, often in wetlands. Sometimes under mature kauri (*Agathis australis* (D.Don.) Lindl.) or along ridge lines in mature forest.

GENUS
Thelymitra

FAMILY
Orchidaceae

AUTHORITY
Thelymitra pulchella Hook.f.

SYNONYMS
Thelymitra concinna Col., Thelymitra fimbriata Col., Thelymitra pachyphylla Cheeseman, Thelymitra caesia Petrie

TAXONOMIC NOTES
An extremely variable plant that evolved through hybridisation with *Thelymitra cyanea* and *T. longifolia* J.R.Forst. et G.Forst. Both parents account for the wide variation in flower colour, column and column-arm shape, colour and ornamentation.

ENDEMIC TAXON
Yes

ENDEMIC GENUS
No

ENDEMIC FAMILY
No

FLOWERING
October–January

FRUITING
December–April

PROPAGATION TECHNIQUE
Very easily grown in a sunny, well drained site. Often naturalises in gardens within urban areas abutting indigenous vegetation in northern New Zealand. Although easily cultivated, like all orchids it should not be removed from the wild.

WETLAND PLANT INDICATOR STATUS RATING
FACW: Facultative Wetland
Usually is a hydrophyte but occasionally found in uplands (non-wetlands).

ETYMOLOGY
thelymitra: Woman's hat
pulchella: Pretty little thing

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

NVS CODE
THEPUL

CHROMOSOME NUMBER
2n = 66

PREVIOUS CONSERVATION STATUSES

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

REGIONAL CONSERVATION STATUSES

Auckland: 2025 | Regionally Not Threatened | Qualifiers: DPS, DPT 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.
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.
Rolfe JR, de Lange PJ. 2010. Illustrated guide to New Zealand sun orchids, *Thelymitra* (Orchidaceae). Jeremy Rolfe, Wellington, NZ. 57 p.

ATTRIBUTION

Description adapted from Moore and Edgar (1970).
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MORE INFORMATION

https://www.nzpcn.org.nz/flora/species/thelymitra-pulchella/

PDF DATE

27 May 2026