

Microtis oligantha

COMMON NAMES

small onion orchid

BIOSTATUS

Native – Endemic taxon

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

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.



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



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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

CURRENT CONSERVATION STATUS

2023 | Not Threatened

[Jump to previous conservation statuses](#)

DETAILED TAXONOMY

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

ECOLOGY

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).

OTHER INFORMATION

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: 2024 | Regionally Not Threatened

REFERENCING AND CITATIONS

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.

NZPCN FACT SHEET CITATION

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MORE INFORMATION

<https://www.nzpcn.org.nz/flora/species/microtis-oligantha/>

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