

Cypripedium acaule (Pink Moccasin Flower)

Botanical Bytes by Bruner a "Trail Snack"

By Gregory Bruner

Foliage Height: 3-6"
Foliage Width: 6-12"
Flower Height: 8-12"
Foliage Color: Green
Flower Color: Pink
USDA Hardiness: 2-8
Moisture: Average
Light: Partial Shade to Shade



I was crouched over an uncooperative Trillium that refused to remain still so that my camera could focus clearly when my son called out, "Daddy, Daddy...come see this one!" I slowly rose up and turned, expecting to see one of the many common leafy denizens of the forest. Instead, what I saw took my breath away.

I quietly and almost reverently walked across the trail and knelt down to examine this rare woodland beauty. Beside me my son whispered, "Daddy...it's beautiful." I returned the whisper. "Yes it is, son. Yes it is," not wanting to disturb natural perfection.

Cypripedium acaule, also known as Pink Moccasin Flower or Pink Lady Slipper, is one of the true treasures of the woodland. Lady Slippers have a fairly wide range, being found in the eastern United States and north into Canada. However, because of the specific site conditions needed for them to thrive, they are rare gems to find in the wild.

Lady Slippers' natural habitats are generally a mixture of hardwood and pine trees on slopes in the woods. This provides for their needs of a rich well-drained site as well as a very acidic soil pH in the 3.5-5.0 range. The hardwood leaves supply the rich organic matter, while the pine needles lower the pH and the slope allows for excellent drainage.

The uniquely intricate flower is held up on a single stem, and each plant typically has only two dark green strap-like leaves. Normally there is only one flower per set of leaves.

This plant has a unique relationship with its environment. There is a fungus in the Rhizoctonia genus that must be present in the soil for Lady Slippers to thrive and reproduce. The fungus actually connects to the seed coats and breaks them open, attaching to the seed. The fungus then passes on much-needed nutrients to the seedling.

The favor is returned as the Lady Slippers mature and the fungus actually begins to draw back nutrients. Lady Slippers can thrive for 20 or more years if they like where they are growing. This unique relationship makes it almost impossible to transplant Lady Slippers, so it is best to enjoy them in the wild.

The regal and elegant Pink Lady Slipper is the queen of the woodland—one of the true gems to be admired by young and old plant hunters alike.