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Orchis

Orchidaceae

Orchis is a classical Greek word for ‘testicle’ and the name is supposed to have been given by the Greeks to any plant that displayed two oblong tubers at the root. This association also led many of these plants including those in the *Orchis* genus to be valued as aphrodisiacs. In a Roman legend *Orchis*, son of a satyr and a nymph, insulted a priestess of Bacchus and was killed by the Bacchanalians. His satyr father prayed for him and the gods transformed him into an orchid. (In 16th Century England this tale was well-known and at that time orchids were called Satyrions because they were believed to be the food of satyrs, a food that drove them to outrageous behaviour.)

The tubers have long been used to make ‘salep’ or ‘saloop’ (a corruption of the Arabian word *sahlep*), as also some of the *Dactylorhiza* and *Ophrys* species. (According to some authorities the starch-like substance in the tubers of many of the species in this genus is so nutritious that an ounce of it alone would be enough to sustain any man for a day.) Salep was a satisfying drink prepared for centuries in Persia (now Iran) and Turkey. It was popular there until superseded by coffee. In Britain in more recent centuries salep used to be sold from stalls on the London streets and Charles Lamb (1775-1834), the noted English essayist, mentions a shop in Fleet Street where it was served in his lifetime. He described the ideal chimney-sweep’s breakfast as a three-halfpence basin of salep with a halfpenny slice of bread-and-butter. At the beginning of the 20th Century it could still be bought on the streets of the Turkish Constantinople (Istanbul) as a hot Winter drink. Today in India the *Orchis* tubers remain an ingredient in some chocolate and sweetmeats – while in Turkey and modern Greece they are eaten with honey.

Today tubers of *Orchis* species provide an ingredient with which the pharmaceutical industry makes convalescent/invalid and other foods.