

AUTUMN LADY'S-TRESSES

Common Name:	Autumn Lady's-tresses
Scientific Name:	<i>Spiranthes spiralis</i>
Irish Name:	<i>Cúilín Muire</i>

This is a very handsome plant, superbly designed to have its spike of flowers arranged in a spiral pattern up the stem. Each little flower is pure white and fragrant; the lower lip or labellum is greenish and is hardly any longer than the other petals. The flower does not have a spur. The spike carrying the flowers is rarely higher than 15 cm. The basal rosette of oval leaves has usually withered before the grey-green flower stem appears; there are a few scale-like leaves up this stem.

The amazingly clever spiral is made of a straight, single row of flowers which is twisted around the stem, the lower ones being the first to flower. As its name suggests, this plant flowers from early August to the end of September. It is a native plant belonging to the Orchidaceae family.

I first noticed this little plant growing close to the sea at Rath, County Kerry in 1977 and photographed it in 2008 at Ballyteigue, County Wexford.

Just at the time when the best of the summer's plants are dying off and thoughts turn to cooler days and nights, this little plant appears. It is a very small plant and it takes quite a time to find it even when you have an idea of where to look.

It likes to face the sunshine so can be found where the grass is not too long, on dry sand-based turf, along with declining Common Bird's-foot-trefoil, Common Centaury and Common Stork's-bill.

Once you see your first specimen, the rest will be easier to find. Good luck.

Zoë Devlin is a regular columnist for Pollinia on the wild orchids of Ireland.

Zoë's website is "Wildflowers of Ireland"

<http://goo.gl/2y2um>

Her book '**Wildflowers of Ireland - A personal Record**' is published by the Collins Press, Cork





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