

AN UNUSUAL HUNTER

by Rich Creason



The predator waits patiently for his prey, and the unsuspecting animal comes closer finally entering the killing zone. The trap is sprung, and the hunter has captured his meal. But in this case, the animal is an insect and the hunter is a plant!

Carnivorous plants have fascinated people for ages. Hollywood versions of man-eating plants have appeared in every horror movie set in a swamp or on an alien planet. (It's always the last guy in the line who gets eaten!) While to my knowledge, no man-eating size plants still exist, if we were the size of an ant or a fly, the movie could be a true story.

In the wild, carnivorous or insectivorous plants live mostly in peat bogs and swamps where the soil lacks nutrients and the temperature is usually, but not always, very warm. A few species live in water. To receive the nutrition necessary for their growth, these plants evolved into meat eaters. Each type has bright coloring and secretes a nectar to attract insects. Flies, mosquitoes, ants, beetles, and other insects are common food for wild plants while indoor specimens are sometimes fed tiny bits of hamburger

or cooked egg white. To be considered a true carnivorous plant, it must attract, kill, digest its prey, and utilize the digested product as food.

These unusual plants catch their food in five different ways. One way is a pitfall trap. The Pitcher Plant is an example of this. It has a rolled leaf which the prey falls into, dropping to the bottom of this tube into a collection of digestive enzymes. Some of these tubes are up to two feet deep and two inches wide at the top. The victim is attracted by the bright green color & the secreted nectar and crawls inside, never to come out. One species of the Genus *Sarracenia*, the most common of the pitcher plants, lives from Canada to South America. It's the most commonly cultivated of the carnivorous plants because it is easy to grow and fairly hardy.

Another common group of meat-eating plants are the Sundews and Butterworts. These have flypaper type traps. Their hairy surface is covered with sticky, glue-like mucilage, which glistens in the sun to attract their targets. When

the insect lands to investigate, he remains. Sundews are found on all continents except Antarctica and are especially common in Australia. These too are often grown in homes, greenhouses and nurseries.

The third and most commonly known are the snap trap species. The one even most school children have heard of is the Venus Fly Trap (*Dionaea muscipula*). This attractive plant has numerous bright red traps which have bristles inside. When these sensitive trigger hairs are touched by an unsuspecting fly or other insect, the trap quickly snaps shut on the dinner guest. While well known, this species is not easily grown by amateurs. In nature, it is found entirely in North and South Carolina. Another species of snap trap is the Waterwheel, which is an aquatic plant. If you have one of these plants, don't play with the traps. After the trap shuts six or eight times, it may die and fall off. The Bladderworts have a bladder type trap for securing their victims. These species are both aquatic and terrestrial. The specialized leaves form a partial vacuum and the suction draws the food source into the bladder of the plant.

The last type of catch mechanism is the lobster pot trap. This is found on the Corkscrew plants, which are another aquatic species. This method has an easy to enter opening allowing the prey to swim in, but then is difficult to exit because of obstructions or inward facing bristles.

If you would like to try growing one (or several) of these highly unusual specimens, they can sometimes be found in local garden centers or in seed catalogs. I have also seen them offered in the garden department at Walmart or at Lowe's Hardware or you can check online under Carnivorous Plants for Sale. There is also available an outstanding 200-page book titled "Carnivorous Plants of the World" by James and Patricia Pietropaolo, which I purchased for my collection.

There are over 400 species of wild carnivorous plants. They are found in the eastern 1/3 of the U.S., Europe, Canada, Australia, and even parts of Alaska, but they can sometimes be difficult to grow indoors. The plant needs a lot of direct sunlight and high humidity to create its natural environment. Your specimen should use a soil mix of 1/3 peat, 1/3 sphagnum moss, and 1/3 sand, which must be

kept wet from spring to fall. Letting the pot stand in a saucer of water will help accomplish this requirement. Use rainwater or distilled water for best results and frequent misting is helpful.

In the fall, your plants will want to go into dormancy due to the change in light intensity and duration entering the winter months. The leaves will stop growing, winter buds will form, and the above ground parts of the plant will start dying back. This often appears that the plant is dead, but the underground rhizome, root, tube, or bulb is still much alive. This part of their life cycle is necessary for their flowering pattern to continue in the spring. Your plant should be placed in a setting (garage, cellar, enclosed porch, etc.) where the temperature should be between 35 and 50 degrees. Light is still necessary, but in lesser amounts during this period. Water also should be reduced. As spring approaches, light, water, and temperature can slowly be returned to normal.

Carnivorous plants are becoming endangered in the wild due to draining of their habitat. If you are fortunate to discover these plants in nature, do not disturb them! While not as quick or efficient as a flyswatter, carnivorous plants are definitely more interesting to watch. And while there probably aren't any thirty-foot plants around anymore, I wouldn't want to be the last in line on a jungle hike. RC

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