Carnivorous Plants – Plants That Eat Meat

Most of the time, plants are the ones that get eaten, but every now and then, a plant gets revenge. Some plants are **carnivores**. This means that they eat meat! Now, they certainly don't eat steak, but they're happy to feast on the occasional bug that crosses their path. Carnivorous plants have a variety of methods to get prey: Pitfall traps (like the pitcher plant), snap traps (like the Venus flytraps) and flypaper traps (like sundews) are just a few.

Most carnivorous plants live in boggy areas. They live in poor, wet soil that doesn't have a lot of nutrients; Soil that has little nitrogen. All living things must have nitrogen. Carnivorous plants get nitrogen from the insects they eat.

Carnivorous plants may seem exotic, but if you live in the United States, you don't have to travel to faraway lands to see some. North America has more carnivorous plant genera than any other continent.

Venus flytraps are probably the most famous carnivorous plants. These plants have a pair of thick, padded leaves that are covered with tiny hairs. When a fly touches the hairs – SNAP – the leaves shut like two powerful jaws. The plant releases enzymes that break down the fly's insides into a soup. Dinner is served.

The trap portion of the plant (part that catches the bug) is only good for up to 6 catches, after that it turns brown, withers and falls off.

Carnivorous plants seem exotic, but more grow in the U.S. than anywhere else. Venus flytraps are native to North America and are actually not tropical plants. The only place in the world the Venus fly trap grows wild is on the South and North Carolina shores.

Pitcher plants are shaped like a pitcher or narrow champagne glass. The top and inside of the pitcher is covered with a slippery, but sweet-smelling nectar. When insects come to take a sip, they slip and fall into the pitcher. The insect cannot get out of the cup because the walls are smooth and slippery and have hairs pointing down. There, the plant breaks them down. The liquid inside of the plant, contains chemicals that are similar to those found in your stomach.

Some pitcher plants are so large, they can catch and consume rats or frogs.

Some insects and animals live harmoniously with pitcher plants. Some predators, like spiders, use the lid to hide under, and some insect larvae, like mosquitoes, live inside the pitcher plant itself. Ants that die inside the plant are used for their decaying scent to attract other prey. Sometimes small frogs will hide in pitcher plants, eating flies that are attracted to the plant.

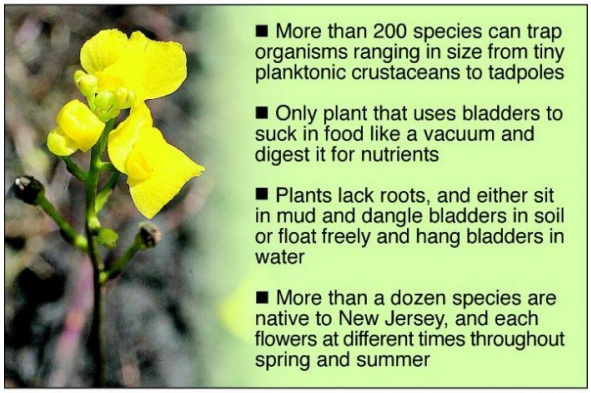
Sundew is another carnivorous plant you'll find in Northeastern bogs. It has a pretty flower that traps hapless creatures using sticky hairs on its leaves, which then curl up. The sticky hairs look like tentacles with glistening drops of dew on their ends, giving the plant its name. Most sundews in the Northeast are small so you have to get down to the level of the plants to see what's happening.

Some species of sundew are listed as threatened or endangered in specific states. The primary threat to sundews is loss of wetland habitat.

Fun Fact: Early settlers extracted a red fluid from sundews to use as ink.

Bladderworts are plants that have no roots and float freely, usually in shallow wetlands. These carnivorous water plants have underwater leaves with small traps, or bladders, that catch tiny aquatic critters. A sweet secretion lures prey. This plant then catches its prey by using tiny capsules, which have doors on them that are lined with very sensitive bristles. If a small water creature touches the bristles, the trap snaps open, sucking in its meal. "Smooosh" goes the door and the prey is tightly sealed inside. The bladderwort then secrets acids to digests its prey and within two hours the plant is ready to reset the trap to try and catch another tasty snack. The bladderwort plant is 100 times faster than the Venus flytrap.

Bladderwort plant facts



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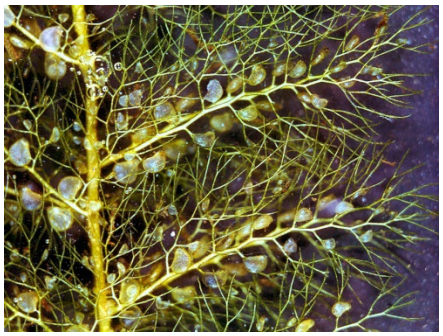

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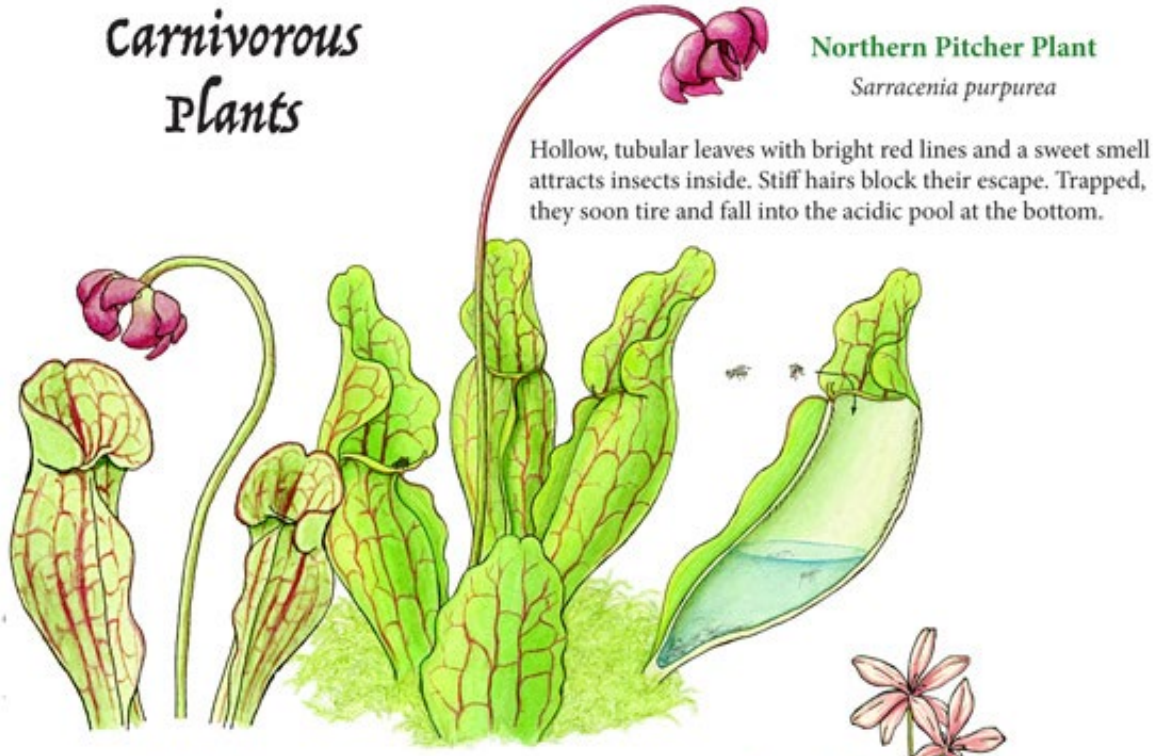
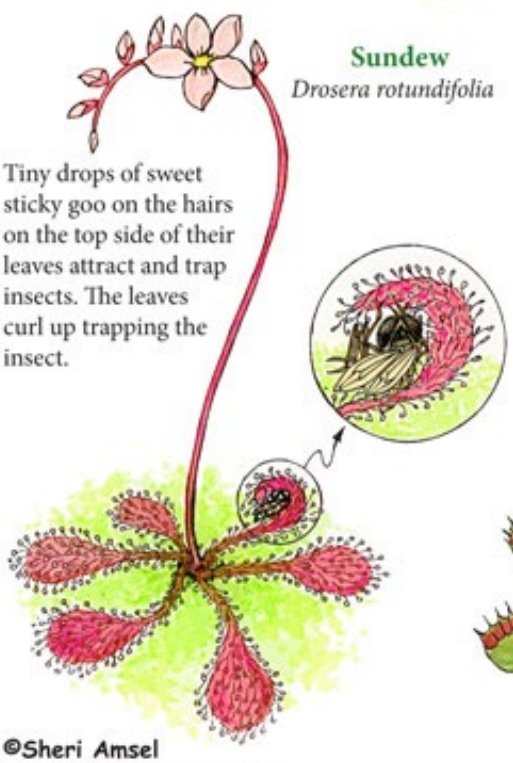


Northern Pitcher Plant

Sarracenia purpurea

Hollow, tubular leaves with bright red lines and a sweet smell attracts insects inside. Stiff hairs block their escape. Trapped, they soon tire and fall into the acidic pool at the bottom.



Sundew

Drosera rotundifolia

Tiny drops of sweet sticky goo on the hairs on the top side of their leaves attract and trap insects. The leaves curl up trapping the insect.

Venus Flytrap

Dionaea muscipula

At the end of each leaf stalk, a clamshell-shaped leaf lays open with a red inside to attract insects. They land inside and trip a hair trigger that snaps the clamshell shut and traps them inside.

Carnivorous Plant Trap Types

Carnivorous plants have developed a wide variety of means of trapping their prey, which is no surprise given the fact that many are only distantly related to each other. This phenomenon is an excellent example of the process of convergent evolution.