

THE SAVAGE GARDEN

“It came from Hollyweird”

by

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I must admit it gets a little tedious, but inevitably, at least weekly, someone comes into California Carnivores and asks, “where’s Audrey?”, usually with a smirk on their face, as though this is certainly one plant we do not grow. With some indifference, I point her out. “She’s over there.” Chuckles and grins, as sure enough there she sits: Audrey II from “Little Shop of Horrors”. Of course, she’s a small, plastic mechanical bank that eats - not people - but coins. She’s a little tattered along the edges, a little loose-lipped in her old age, but she gobbles up pennies and quarters with gusto, which we donate to the Nature Conservancy. Some of the people who demand to see her look like plant food to me.

Now Audrey II may be the most famous man-eating plant from Hollywood, especially after the popular 1986 movie version of the hit Broadway musical, but strange plants, carnivorous or not, have haunted Hollywood since its golden age.

When I was a tiny tot, the original 1960 Roger Corman shot-in-three-days film of Little Shop of Horrors left quite an impression on me. In that version, Audrey was not an alien from outer space teleported to earth, as she was in the later musical version. Actually Seymore created her by - get this - hybridizing a venus fly trap and a *butterwort*! I think it is the only time the word “butterwort” is uttered on the screen. Even in the popular PBS Nature documentary “Deathtrap”, butterworts make a brief screen appearance but the narrator fails to identify the plant. When I once told this to a small boy who was amassing his own carnivorous plant collection, he gleefully told me he was going to try to hybridize his own flytraps and butterworts to see if he could make an Audrey II. I have never seen him since.

However, in Hollywoodland and other film studios, similar scientific experiments have proven successful, often with dire results.

After Little Shop of Horrors, probably the best known is the 1963 version of “Day of the Triffids”. This is a shame, for although this Howard Keel-Janette Scott movie is well-rated and often shown on late night TV, it truly missed the point and plot of John Wyndham’s classic and marvelous novel, still in print after 45 years. I must admit my all-time favorite “man-eating plant” movie is the 1981 three-hour BBC mini-series of “Day of the Triffids”, which debuted on PBS in 1986, and is occasionally shown on obscure cable stations. Although a little slow-moving at times, this masterpiece-theater-like production follows the novel almost page by page.

John Wyndham was ahead of his time. In “Triffids” he foresaw genetic engineering, star-wars technology, viral plagues, and oil shortages, to name a few. Wyndham’s running theme in his novels was to pit humankind against advanced species of

lifeforms, as in his other bestseller “The Midwich Cuckoos”, twice filmed as “Village of the Damned.”

For those not familiar with the complex plot of “Triffids”, the story is basically this: through genetic experiments, a Russian scientist develops a plant to be used for the production of oil. This oil can be used as a replacement for petroleum, so it is a very valuable plant indeed. A Russian spy attempts to smuggle out seed to a western petroleum company, but his plane is shot down. The “vapor-like seed” drifts through the atmosphere, and in a few years triffids begin popping up all over the place. The trouble with triffids is that they are 10 foot tall plants that can uproot themselves and shuffle around on three “stump legs”. Worse, they have whip-like stingers that can kill a man 15 feet away. Even worse, they hang around the rotting corpse and suck out its juices! When it is realized that this new carnivorous species is the mysterious oil plant from Russia, production begins and the plants are grown by the millions on triffid farms for oil. Some people dock the stingers once a year and chain them up in their yards as “pets”.

Actually, all this takes place before the novel and mini-series actually begins. The story centers on a triffid farm employee who, recuperating in a hospital after eye surgery due to a sting, misses out on a world-wide all-night-long cosmic light show, caused, scientists believe, by “cometary debris.” Actually it is a star-wars experiment gone horribly wrong. The next day, about 99% of the world’s population wakes up blind! Our hero, and the few other sighted individuals left, soon have to fight from becoming “slaves” of the surviving blind population. Meanwhile, triffids break free from their farms and begin breeding like cape sundews, stinging anything in their path. By the time the novel ends many years later, and after an ebola-like virus adds further to the horrors, our hero and a few others who lived through it all end up barricading themselves in electrified fortresses, with herds of triffids outside the gates from one horizon to the other.

Generally, true carnivorous plant monster movies go downhill from there. However, many people fail to recall that in some of our best horror movies the monsters were still plants, whether they ate people or not. In what is probably my own favorite horror movie, the plant monsters do not sting or chomp human victims at all. Instead, they duplicate flesh and blood into cellulose and chlorophyll. This, of course, is the famous 1956 version of “Invasion of the Body Snatchers.” Here, the enemy is a plant from outer space, a seed of which falls in a small California town. A doctor in the town, and the narrator of Jack Finney’s popular novel “the Body Snatchers”, begins to have patients claiming “their father isn’t their father and their aunt isn’t their aunt.” We soon find out these alien plants produce watermelon-like pods from which hatch human duplicates while the original model disappears. Carolyn Jones, who would later feed “Cleo” in the Addams family, utters the best line in the movie as she watches a pod hatch. “Is that me?” These duplicates look and act like the original, but with subtle difference. Such as they behave just like communists do, with a sort of collective mind-think and a lack of individualized personality so feared in 1950’s America. The movie was remade in 1978, a major and disappointing change being that the duplicates became dark and brooding conspirators, rather than the happy “est-like” victims of Finney’s novel. The 1993 sequel to that film was even worse. In Finney’s original novel, the plants duplicated *everything*. The first victims were a couple of Del Monte Tomato cans! Also, the duplicates only lasted a few years, when they crumbled into dust. The plants had left Mars a dusty wasteland and were now on earth, copying houses and people and even other plants. In the novel, humans fight back, and the pods end up flying off back into space, to search out more agreeable victims.

The other classic plant monster is "The Thing" (from Another World). John Campbell's story "Who goes there" is more like the 1981 remake by John Carpenter, which itself is more like a body snatcher movie, and not even a plant. But in Howard Hawk's 1951 classic, we should remember that the humanoid who crashes his space ship in the arctic, and who was played by Jim Arness, was indeed a plant. He could regenerate torn limbs, and had seed capsules on his fingers! When the seed was planted in soil, little plants grew like pea pods - when watered with human blood! Inside these pods came the eerie sound of an infant's wail, almost as eerie as Dimitre Tiomkin's score. The thing gets cooked at the end of the film by electrocution. Sadly, Charles Lederer, who wrote the screenplay, failed to check with a botanist about true plant wonders of this earth. He makes something up about the telegraph plant which is nothing like the *Desmodium gyrans* that I grow, and mentions another fantasy plant (the Century Plant) that catches small animals. He could have had the actors talk about *Nepenthes rajah* or even the flytrap, but alas, that's Hollywood. Many other plant horrors can be seen on late night TV, but here I will mention only a few.

"From Hell It Came", 1957. A wonderfully awful picture about a native on a South Pacific Island who's condemned to death for befriending westerners doing - what else? - radioactive experiments. His fellow villagers drive a wooden stake through his heart and bury him in sacred (radioactive) ground. A tree grows above the grave, more like an old stump with a few arm-like branches and a "face" of gnarled, knotty wood complete with a stake in its trunk. A "tabunga", the natives call it. Soon it's shuffling around killing the villagers who killed him!

In "The Unknown Terror", 1957, a mad scientist in South America develops a carnivorous fungus that looks like a bubble bath. He locks victims in a cave where the fungus pours out of cracks to devour anything that moves.

In "Navy versus the Night Monsters", 1966, Mamie Van Doran is attacked by carnivorous monster plants.

It's a space station that's under siege in the 1969 Japanese/American film, "The Green Slime."

George Coulouris feeds scantily-clad prostitutes to the carnivorous tree he grows in his mad-scientist basement laboratory in 1959's "The Woman Eater."

Only semi-plant-monster-oriented, another of my favorite late-nighters is the rather excellent "The Creeping Unknown", which starred Brian Donlevy in 1956. In this atmospheric British thriller, a rocket is sent into space with three men aboard. It crashes back to earth with only one rather comatose survivor and two pools of jelly. An alien something-or-other now inhabits the body of this lone astronaut, and it needs to absorb other life forms to survive. It literally becomes what it eats, and its first good meal is a cactus plant on a hospital room windowsill. "It" escapes the hospital with the help of his wife, who does some of the best hysterical screaming in cinema history when she discovers her husband now has cactus body parts! Loose in London, it has a huge buffet at the local zoo, and turns into... into... well - a creeping unknown!

Strange plants have also made brief appearances in "Werewolf of London", 1939; "Island of Lost Souls", 1933; "Angry Red Planet", 1959; "Konga" (about a giant ape), 1961; and "The Land Unknown", 1957.

What about *real* carnivorous plants in movieland?

A few years ago in CPN it was mentioned that *Sarracenia* had brief appearances on the screen. *S. leucophylla* adorned restaurant tabletops in "Weekend at Bernie's", and *S. flava* were seen in "Mississippi Burning."

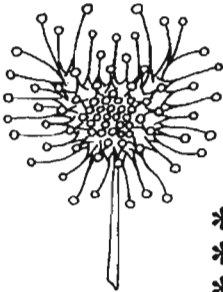
The earliest carnivorous plant supporting role that I can find was in 1935's "Mad Love", starring Peter Lorre. Lorre plays a demented surgeon who performs hideous operations on those he dislikes, namely the handsome pianist who has stolen the love of the girl he admires. When he isn't mutilating the hands of musicians, he's feeding his pet *Darlingtonia* bits of meat. And the cobra plant's "tongue" promptly "rotates" with each mouthful!

In Ginger Roger's academy award winning role in 1940's "Kitty Foyle", her beau gives her - a bouquet of *Darlingtonia*! The tongues don't move in this one, but he does describe it as a "Malaysian flesh-eating plant."

And finally, two versions of Tennessee Williams' "Suddenly Last Summer" have been filmed. The venus flytrap plays a symbolic role in the opening scene. In the 1959 version, Katherine Hepburn shows Montgomery Clift how "Lady" eats flies, provided by her attentive maid in a little box. Of course, the *Dionaea* is actually a model of a rather peculiar *Nepenthes* - and the lid closes when the fly is dropped in! The 1992 version with Maggie Smith is less defined. A flytrap appears as a blur on the screen, with leaves about 16 inches long!

In closing, I'd like to mention a missed opportunity. A few years ago California Carnivores was hired to help decorate a set for a sci-fi movie that was in the planning stages. "Ectopia" was its name. All about horrible mutations in a future world. The director Renee Daalder, who did "Massacre at Central High", had a big photo of cobra plants over his desk. They were going to move most of our greenhouse in a van down to the studios in Hollywood for a few days! Special effects people were going to create scenes of giant sundews and other horrors eating actors like Elizabeth McGovern and Tom Cruise. But alas, at the last minute, the movie was shelved. That, as they say, is Hollywood.

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