

“DISCOVERING” CARNIVOROUS PLANTS

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It goes without saying that carnivorous plants, for all their beauty and benefits, are not the most popular plants in cultivation. Perhaps it is because they require slightly different growing conditions than some. More likely it is their carnivorous nature—plants that are full of the carcasses of dead insects certainly have a different appeal than most cultivated plants. They are usually regarded as freaks of nature.

Unfortunately, so are those of us who grow them. Years ago, when I was single, I learned it was best not to mention my hobby on dates. No matter how much a girl likes plants or flowers, she is rarely impressed by the revelation that you grow carnivorous plants. I also learned to keep mostly quiet about my plants at work, no matter how excited I was about the newest addition to my collection. Most people look at you a little differently when you have just said you grow plants that eat bugs.

But don't get me wrong—I am not embarrassed that I grow carnivorous plants. Given the chance I will bore a person to tears talking about them (just ask my wife!). But I realize that most people do not share this passion for these marvels of nature. So when people talk of increasing the popularity of carnivorous plants in cultivation I wonder if we should even bother. The only market segment consistently attracted to them is young people. Kids are naturally curious about such fascinating and unusual plants and will not be grossed out or turned off by dead bugs. Maybe the best thing to do is make sure they have good growing information.

I got interested in them myself as a kid when I saw ads for flytraps in comic books and magazines. I wondered if such a plant could be for real. I had already found out the hard way that such advertisements were often misleading. The “1,000 Army Men” I purchased turned out to be cheap little flat things, and the “foot locker” they were supposed to arrive in was really only a tiny little box. Even worse, the “sea monkeys” did not even remotely resemble the little people in the advertisements. So I was wary enough not to send in my hard-earned money from mowing lawns. But all that changed when I saw a film about carnivorous plants in a 9th grade biology class. I was hooked.

The problem then became finding the plants. I managed to pick up a flytrap at a local nursery. I was completely fascinated watching the trap snap shut on a piece of ground beef. But the plant did not last long because I did not know about or understand its requirements for light and water. The same thing happened with the pitcher plants I was occasionally lucky enough to find. But I never forgot those feelings of fascination when I first saw these strange plants.

I was recently reminded of this by my Boy Scout troop. As their scoutmaster I had run out of things for them to do one evening. Some of them had expressed interest in my plants so I decided to let them pot up some extras to take home. I was pleasantly surprised a few weeks later when one of the boy's parents enthusiastically told me how well the plants were growing in their kitchen window, and that for his birthday their son had requested more carnivorous plants and a book about how to grow them.

So it has been fun to see his excitement and desire to learn more. I only regret that my own children are so accustomed to them in our home that, although they love showing dad's “bug plants” to their friends, I wonder if they have had the same feelings of amazement and wonder I had when I first watched a flytrap close or looked down the tube of a pitcher plant.