

THE SAVAGE GARDEN: BOB HANRAHAN

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The first time I heard about Bob Hanrahan and World Insectivorous Plants (WIP) was in the spring of 1980. I had just moved from Nob Hill to the Castro Street neighborhood in San Francisco. Around the corner from my Victorian apartment was a shop called Tommy's Plants. They had an interior store and a courtyard out back for outdoor plants.

It was in the courtyard that I experienced a shock that eventually led to a major detour of my entire life. In a large hanging pot was a huge plant I recognized as a sundew, but I had never seen anything like it. It was the giant form of *Drosera binata* var. *dichotoma*.

I had a very nice collection of carnivorous plants back in the late 1960's and early 1970's during my junior high and high school years. On my nursery's web site www.californiacarnivores.com, under About Us, there's an old black and white photo of me at about age 14 that appeared in a local New Jersey newspaper. My lush old-fashioned terrarium was crowded with Venus flytraps, American pitcher plants, and sundews – all were domestic North American species mostly purchased from Northrop's Insectivorous Botanical Gardens and the Carolina Biological Supply Company, both in North Carolina, and Peter Paul's nursery in upper New York state. In those days nearly all the plants sold by these vendors were removed from wild populations.

As I stared at this giant forked-leaved sundew in awe that spring of 1980, I thought of the lone surviving carnivorous plant back at my apartment on my tiny deck. It was a lonely *Sarracenia purpurea* subsp. *purpurea*, the only plant I took with me when I left New Jersey for the University of Miami. I had given my collection to a friend and you can guess what happened to *them*. But I took my purple pitcher plant with me for nostalgic reasons, nearly killing it in hot Miami until I put it in the refrigerator for its winter dormancy. The plant followed me when I relocated to San Francisco. I knew that moment in Tommy's Plants my solitary survivor would soon have little friends.

Bill Barnett, an employee at Tommy's (now at Sloat Gardens), was thrilled at my excitement, for most customers knew nothing about carnivorous plants. He showed me plants he had for sale: Venus flytraps, sundews like *Drosera aliciae*, *capensis*, *binata*, and \times *watari*, and some *Sarracenia* as well. I bought them all! It was an amazing day of revelation for me. Bill told me a carnivorous plant society had been started a few years before and its co-founder, Joe Mazrimas, lived in the Bay Area. He lent me copies of CPN, and also Adrian Slack's "Carnivorous Plants", published the year before, and Don Schnell's "Carnivorous Plants of the United States and Canada", published in 1976.

"But where did you get *these* plants from?" I asked Bill, as he rang up my purchases. He pointed to the literature he was lending me. "You've got the catalogue right there. World Insectivorous Plants, owned by a guy named Bob Hanrahan. And he *propagates* all of the plants he sells. Nothing is taken out of the wild!"

Bob Hanrahan was born in Los Angeles in 1947. He attended Long Beach City College and then Brigham Young University in Utah, where he was on the track team and an All American for the long jump in 1967. He received his BS degree from Long Beach State College and worked his whole life as an engineer for Lockheed Martin. He married his wife Cathy in 1969, an always gracious woman



Bob Hanrahan (center) with Damon Collingsworth (left) and Peter D'Amato (right) at California Carnivores in 2010.

I've met several times. They had three kids and several grandkids, and were active in The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints.

Bob started WIP in 1978. His business partner was Clark Barton, with whom I am still friends. (I got Bob, Cathy, and Clark together just a few years ago. Bob was thrilled I knew him and they had lunch in Reno where Clark retired when Bob and Cathy last visited me.) Clark helped finance WIP's large automated greenhouse in Arroyo Grande in Southern California. They began to propagate carnivorous plants (CP) at a furious rate and sell them bare-root through mail order. The first article Bob wrote for CPN was about purifying water through reverse-osmosis, a new invention at the time. He wrote only a few articles for CPN, which is a shame, since he was a very good writer.

Due to his job, the Hanrahans moved to Florida for a while and Bob continued WIP. Jim Miller, still active in the hobby, was an employee. Later Bob had to relocate again, this time near Atlanta, Georgia.

I ordered my first catalogue directly from WIP on December 27, 1981, and received my first plants that February. WIP's plants were always high quality and I was thrilled with them. I began to grow many of them in a "potted-greenhouse-style tank" so I could remove temperate plants for winter. I also grew many on my tiny deck and an outdoor window box. I was a design engineer for Levi Strauss at the time and soon my sunny office windowsill facing San Francisco Bay was crowded with CP, much to the amusement of co-workers. All my plants came from WIP.

In February, 1983, I moved north to Sonoma County. There were several reasons but the main one was I needed room for all of the plants I was buying from Bob, and also trading with growers from around the world.

In 1988, Bob announced in a CPN article that he was winding down the retail end of WIP. He was going to produce fewer varieties and sell primarily wholesale. One thing that frustrated him was that most CP growers at the time wanted to buy plants "cheap" and Bob admitted with honest bitterness that due to the time and expense of propagating so many plants and running a mail-order nursery, the plants he was selling should cost up to ten times more than what he was getting for them.

In early 1989, I had been working at a resort on the Russian River for six years. The resort was sold, and although the new owners wanted me to stay on as a manager, all I was thinking about was growing CP and selling them wholesale to local nurseries. In one of those psychic, synchronistic events, Bob Hanrahan called me. “How would you like to be the wholesale distributor for my Venus flytraps in Northern California?” I enthusiastically agreed.

In April of 1989, I was asked by a large garden show in San Francisco to co-ordinate a display for the newly founded Bay Area Carnivorous Plant Society that I helped co-found. We had less than a dozen members and no one had the time. I already had a business license for California Carnivores to sell Bob’s Venus flytraps and thought: If I did a display on my own, maybe I could pick up a dozen or so interested nurseries and wholesale Bob’s plants to them! Friends helped me. At the three-day show, we gave away 3,500 cards – and people weren’t interested in just flytraps! I decided I had to go retail and do something no one had done before: open a CP nursery to the public with regular business hours.

I struggled that year selling Bob’s flytraps but not making much money. That autumn I found a dilapidated large greenhouse for rent at a winery, and I called Bob. “Help! I have to fill my nursery up with plants for sale by spring!” Bob laughed. “Just tell me what you want!” he enthusiastically replied.

California Carnivores opened to the public in the spring of 1990. Although I had a number of plants to sell that I had propagated myself, 50% of our stock came from Bob. The nursery appeared on TV shows, magazines, and numerous newspapers including the New York Times. This would not have happened without Bob Hanrahan.

I didn’t meet Bob in person until the first ICPS conference in Atlanta in 1997. He was tall, handsome, and always exuberant, like a kid who just found out he would be taking a trip to Mars! At his house, then in Marietta, a bunch of us “old timers” marveled at his collection – not just his plants but books, articles, old CP catalogues from days gone by. (Bob had a nostalgic streak. He once sent me an Internet link to old TV commercials from the 1950’s and 60’s that made me laugh my head off and he wrote “Those were the days!”)

It was after the conference that many of us visited “the plantation”, a multi-acre parcel of land Bob had purchased with an extraordinary population of native pitcher plants and sundews in southern Alabama. This was where I raised such a fuss over one incredible *Sarracenia* hybrid. He gave me and Leo Song the honor of removing a piece of rhizome, which he turned over to the Atlanta Botanical Gardens in an attempt to have it tissue cultured. (Alas, the attempt failed.) I later nominated the plant as *S. ‘Adrian Slack’* with Bob’s blessing, honoring the legendary British horticulturalist in the CPN’s issue commemorating him.

I’ve been to the plantation a couple of times since. On one trip, with Bob limping due to hip replacement surgery, we took a six-hour tour until I couldn’t walk anymore. He, however, was practically jumping up and down wanting to show me yet another section of the property. His wife Cathy came to my rescue with iced sweet tea from “the shack”, a tiny, comfortable cottage he had built there.

While Bob kept the property primarily as a preserve, he also had a small area where he grew and propagated introduced plants such as Venus flytraps. He would harvest seed from the property to sell to the Dune Craft company that marketed small plastic terrariums and seed of CP to children’s toy and science stores.

He was rightfully boastful of his propagation prowess as well. He would phone me or send an email saying things like, “Yesterday I planted 3,788 baby *Sarracenia*, laid out 2,100 sundew leaf

cuttings, and collected three pounds of Venus flytrap seed! Oh! And I painted a neighbor's barn too!" I'm only *slightly* exaggerating.

In more recent years, Bob informed me of his health challenges. I had been writing a series of biographical essays for CPN on influential persons involved with carnivorous plants (such as F.E. Lloyd, Paul Zahl, Joe Mazrimas, and Don Schnell) and told Bob my next piece would be on him. However, in 2011 I was asked by my publisher to revise and update my book *The Savage Garden*, which took nearly a year and half to complete, and was also a few hundred pages into a botanical horror novel called *From a Crevice in Hell*.

Bob seemed to be having some improvement with his cancer through treatments such as stem cell therapy. He and Cathy were to visit California Carnivores this past spring, 2013. I told him I would interview him then. Unfortunately he had to cancel, having health setbacks, but told me he would try to come out for the nursery's annual summer party in July. I told him if he was up to it he could be our guest speaker.

But sadly, the visit never happened. Bob passed away on May 25th, leaving a legacy rich with humor, passion, and many of the plants we all grow.



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