

BOOK REVIEW

Hewitt-Cooper, Nigel. 2016. *Carnivorous Plants: Gardening with Extraordinary Botanicals*. Hardcover: 232 pages, Dimensions: 8.1 × 0.8 × 9.1 inches. Timber Press (February 24, 2016). ISBN-13: 978-1604695793.

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In front of me lies a new book on carnivorous plants. It is one of several books that has been published recently and, as it is a general book, I'm intrigued to find out what it has to offer compared to other publications.

Early in the book, the author states: "It seems there remains a gap in the market, however—a lack of information in print as to the general cultivation of carnivorous plants. I still hear this from people, as well as the problem that the huge amount of information available online is bewildering and often contradictory. The purpose of this book is to act as both a general introduction to the genre of carnivorous plants, and as a guide for the more advanced grower who may have had a few successes and wishes to delve deeper into this peculiar and somewhat alien world."

I'm afraid I have to disagree with the first part of that statement, even before getting to the content.

First of all it doesn't do justice to some excellent general works by others, like the books by Barry Rice, Natch Greyes, and of course Peter D'Amato. Secondly it underestimates the Internet skills by the younger generation. There is plenty of good information on the web and in my experience they are quite capable of finding it. Having said that, we have a book that aims to be a general introduction for people who are just starting and the more advanced grower that wants to improve. I therefore have read the book through those eyes.

The book opens with a fairly standard story on the relation between science and carnivorous plants with the household names you would expect. Darwin, Governor Dobbs, and Veitch all come by in a good and to the point text. Then the author goes into definitions, opening with citing what criteria make a carnivorous plant. As there are more definitions around and the debate on which one to use will probably last us for some time to come, I will only say that the approach selected is a narrower one, and indeed, *Roridula*, *Byblis*, and the Bromeliads don't get mentioned in the book. The author continues by giving definitions on subjects like cultivars and forms and needs to be commended for being one of the few authors that will go there. He continues this with explanations on flowers that are monoecious, dioecious, and subjects like self-fertile as opposed to self-pollenating and self-sterile. Again a very good point for an introduction as many new growers are not familiar with these terms.

Further along the author goes into what he calls the "three golden rules" for temperate species. Essentially keep the plant in full sun, keep it wet with rain water, and give it a cold dormancy. At this point I get a bit confused. After giving three golden rules for temperate species, I would have expected rules for tropical species, possibly a bit split up to make distinctions in preferences of several plants. However, these are not mentioned.

The confusion continues as artificial lighting is worked out in case full sun is not available. In my experience, most temperate species don't do well in amateur set ups with artificial light so perhaps not the best place for this text. A number of possible light sources are mentioned, but while the book has some nice clear tables, a much in demand table is missing about how much light a species needs and what light to use.

In the water section, the author does a good job explaining things about water, including the boiling myth and temporary and permanent hardness of water. Personally, I haven't encountered that distinction often, but it is very clear.

As I mentioned, the book has some very clear tables and we encounter a nice table showing temperature during dormancy. However, there is a part that will likely confuse the novice grower. For example, terms like South African *Drosera* and terrestrial *Utricularia* are used, but these plants will not be discussed until much later in the book. Also it is a pity that the ever popular Venus flytrap doesn't appear in the table, but does get mentioned in the text.

The part of the book that deals with what soil mix to use is good and has some clear pictures of various products. Again a clear table, but it does use terms like pygmy *Drosera* and terrestrial *Utricularia* that still need to be explained to our novice.

The where to grow section is also nice, combining general information with details like the height of a bench in a greenhouse. The section on bogs is illustrated with bogs in various parts of the world. Even the use of carnivorous plants at pond margins is discussed, with the warning that fish will produce too much nutrients for the plants.

The text on planting terrariums is also very good and contains much of the information a first-time builder would want. The section on year-round maintenance and tools could have been a bit longer, but deals with the basics.

This is followed by a section on pests and disease that is both thorough and has some clear pictures. Frankly, this is the best such section in a beginner's book that I personally have seen so far.

A small negative point is that some of the pesticides mentioned are not available to the general public (at least not in several countries) and that is actually a good thing in my opinion. For instance, the first product mentioned, Acetamiprid, is a neonicotinoid that is extremely harmful to bees. More friendly alternatives are mentioned, though not by name. I'm afraid that the average starting grower is likely to pick the first product mentioned if he can get it, so maybe not such a good idea.

By now we have read almost half the book (86 pages) and we are getting to the plants.

The first section deals with what is called "Common carnivores for easy growing". Geography, habitat conditions, cultivation, and propagation are discussed in clear texts. It is only in this section that the reader learns a bit more about terms like tuberous and pygmy *Drosera*. Not that those are recommended as easy and common in this introduction (except one pygmy). Basically it is the author's view that *Darlingtonia*, *Dionaea*, *Drosera*, *Pinguicula*, and *Utricularia* comprise the section easy growing. Luckily the species suggested under each family are, generally speaking, indeed easy species. Having said that, as a passionate grower of *Drosera*, I do have my doubts about placing *D. adelae*, *D. regia*, and *D. slackii* in this category.

Which plants compose the section labelled "Taking things to the next level"? The answer is *Cephalotus*, *Heliophora*, and *Nepenthes*. Again the text on these plants is solid, but it is not what I expected. I would have expected to find *N. × ventrata* in the first section and some more difficult species of *Nepenthes* in the second. Not a classification of all *Nepenthes* as "the next level", not to mention that some species like *N. rajah* and *N. bicalcarata* are in my opinion several levels above easy and not the next level. At this point the book misses its brief of "a guide for the more advanced grower who may have had a few successes and wishes to delve deeper into this peculiar and somewhat alien world."

It is a pity that the author chose not to include plants like *Byblis*, the Bromeliads, and *Roridula* (perhaps because of the narrow approach to carnivory I mentioned earlier?). In a beginners book I would at least have expected to have all families dealt with. But even so, where is *Genlisea* and *Aldrovanda* (I'll let *Philcoxia* slide)?

A 3-page chapter labelled “Children, beginners & education” is added, but doesn’t add much beyond the very correct warning to stay away from the complete pre-packaged seed sets sold in some shops.

The book closes with resources, societies, and recommended reading. Good sources, though it pains me that my beloved International Carnivorous Plant Society is labeled as “United States”.

So, what do I think of this book? In general, the book is good for the starting grower, though I would have preferred that the author had taken a broader approach to carnivory and dealt with all the regular families found in most books. The book combines texts that range from good to absolutely excellent with a set-up that sometimes is confusing to follow—things get mentioned too early or too late for my feeling. The division of easy and next level plants is not one I would have made on the family level and that makes it a bit tricky, though most of the recommended plants in the easy section would steer our novice clear of major issues.

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