

## FROM THE JUNGLE BACK TO THE DRAWING BOARD...AND BACK: AN INTERVIEW WITH FRANÇOIS SOCKHOM MEY

MARCEL VAN DEN BROEK • marcel@carnivorousplants.org

In a time that we can't travel as we would wish; you can't just walk off into the field and have a great fieldtrip to report. Travelling within Europe is hard enough these viral days. I had hoped to see my good friend François in Ghent at the European meeting, but unfortunately that annual institute of carnivorous plant fun also got killed by COVID-19. What follows is a properly social distanced, interview with François Sockhom Mey.

MARCEL: Most people in the CP community connect you with the rediscovery of *Nepenthes thorelii* and the discovery of *Nepenthes bokorensis*, but you also make beautiful CP illustrations. How long have you been drawing and what subjects do you draw?

FRANÇOIS: That may sound a cliché, but I've been drawing as long as I can remember. Drawing plants is relatively recent though. As a child, I mainly drew characters, animals, portraits sometimes. Very quickly, I turned my interest into comic book drawing, a field I have investigated for more than 25 years. For what seemed to be an endless time, I tried to finish and publish a graphic novel. In vain. In fact, I had eventually found a publisher and my work was scheduled to be released when I abruptly realized that I would not be mentally able to terminate that project. The gestation had taken way too much time and the baby was born dead. I was feeling unable to properly achieve the book. The resentment was vivid, and I needed to move on to something else. All of a sudden, I quit drawing comic books, a very painful decision so to speak. That was in late 2017.

I had another passion then: carnivorous plants. My interest for it really started in 2004 although I had a general interest in plants before that: I used to rear various species of caterpillars and others insects when I was a child and had a basic knowledge in botany.

In 2009, many years before I abandoned my graphic novel project, I published my first scientific botanical illustration with the description of the Cambodian and endemic pitcher plant species *Nepenthes bokorensis*. It was the very first *Nepenthes* species I described as a publishing taxonomist. As a non-academic, I had taught myself how to write and publish a scientific description (and been largely guided in the process by a few experts that have now become longtime friends). While I was preparing that first scientific work, it was clear to me that I would find a way to produce the botanical illustration myself although it was also obvious that doing a botanical plate had little to do with composing a comic book strip. I was confident that I could make it though and, in my mind, I potentially had the skills and the incentive: I didn't want the process of doing a botanical illustration to be as painful as it was at the time for the creation of my comic book.

Therefore, in the same way that I had studied taxonomy, I spent countless hours and nights understanding the field of botanical illustration. The *Nepenthes* drawings published in Benedictus Danser's monograph (1928) and Jebb & Cheek's (1997, 2001) were particularly useful in my schooling as well as various volumes of the Flora of Cambodia, Laos and Vietnam that include many drawings of non-carnivorous plants. Oddly, in that period, I didn't research any of the contemporary botanical illustrations and illustrators. I worked as a hermit, lost in decades and centuries old botanical plates, completely unaware of the productions of my contemporary colleagues.

When I provided that first illustration, I deemed the exercise as an interesting and an enjoyable recreation, but I didn't think I would investigate botanical illustration much further. It was more

like a side interest that I would practice occasionally when needed. I was too obsessed then with my grand graphic novel. I remember I had to produce the *N. bokorensis* illustration in a hurry. There was a competitor paper at the time and I suddenly realized that I would have no time to further study the art of botanical illustration: I had to literally produce the illustration overnight, from scratch, if I wanted to publish first. That weekend, in March or February 2009, I found out I had no proper drawing paper and I used a mere office sheet for printer! My paper eventually came out first along with that first clumsy botanical plate. Little did I realize at the time that this illustration would be the first of an ongoing series.

MARCEL: So, you are a self-taught artist?

FRANÇOIS: I'm a completely self-taught illustrator. I have a degree in modern literature and am a certified teacher for middle school and high school, but never took proper classes for drawing and painting although, obviously, I have studied and am still studying the discipline. The same thing applies for botany and taxonomy. Although I authored and co-authored a number of botanical papers, I am academically trained in literature only. Retrospectively, I think I would have loved to take classes in both fields, it would have saved me some time, but at the end I am happy with the path I've chosen. In the future, if given the chance I think I will take classes to improve, especially in the art of botanical illustration.

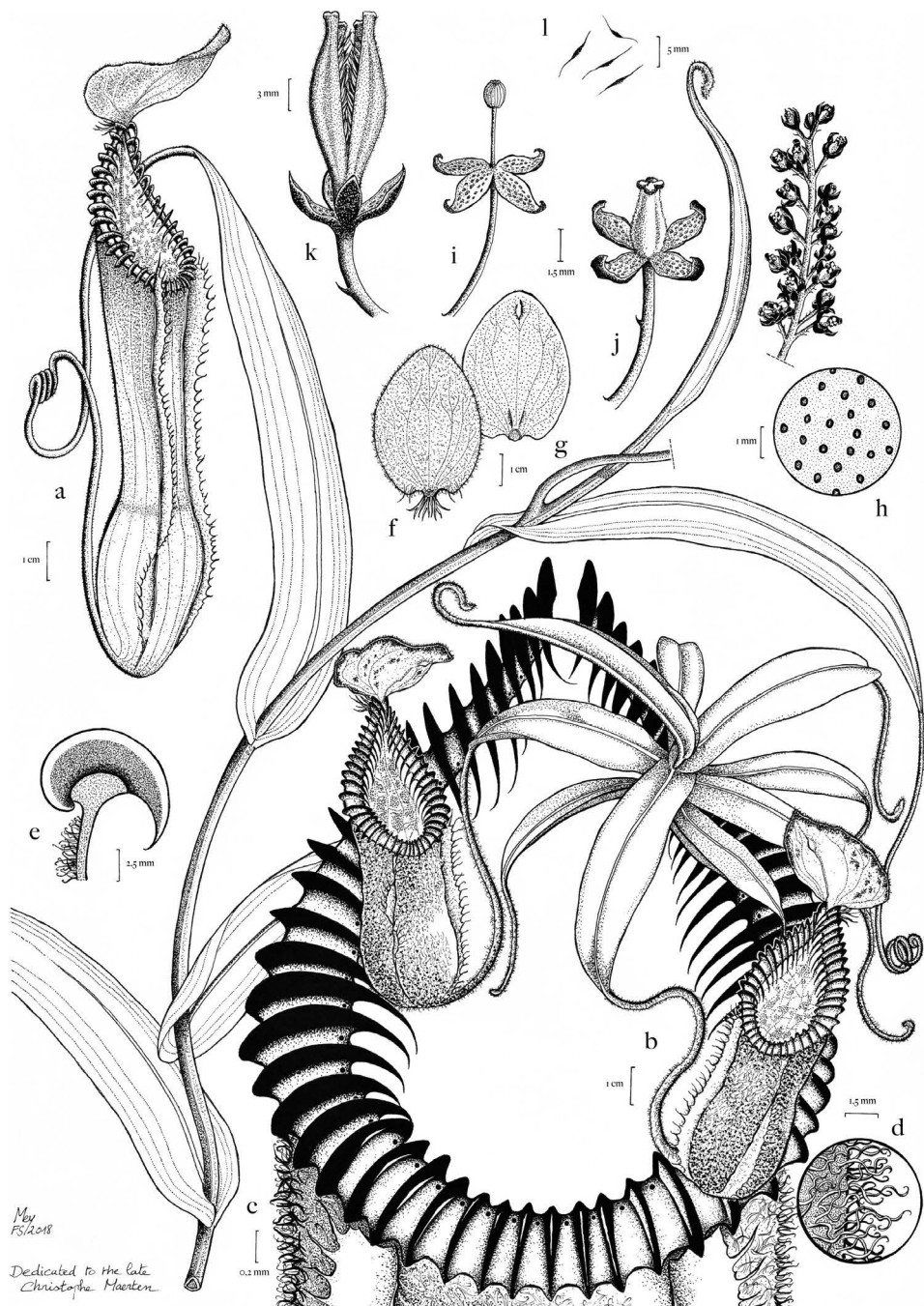
MARCEL: That *N. bokorensis* drawing was followed by many illustrations for scientific papers and books. Can you name some of your work?

FRANÇOIS: In 2009, when I just drew that *N. bokorensis* illustration, I was asked by Stewart McPherson (whom I made the acquaintance with about 2 years before) to publish several diagrams showing leaf and pitcher morphology for his forthcoming Pitcher Plants of the Old World, Volume Two, a monograph on *Nepenthes* and *Cephalotus*, that would be published by Redfern Natural History. Stewart subsequently asked for more commissions for other Redfern titles the following year.

2010 would turn out to be a very productive year for my standards as I illustrated 5 *Nepenthes* for academic papers: another Cambodian endemic, *Nepenthes holdenii*; the elusive Vietnamese *N. thorelii* based on herbarium material only as there was no available picture of that species at the time; as well as three Filipino species: *Nepenthes palawanensis*, *N. hamiguitanensis*, and *N. gantunganensis*. On top of this, I produced a series of plates for Redfern Natural History to showcase various genera of carnivorous plants. These were interesting work to do as I got to investigate botanical illustration much further and got to draw many different types of plants, from the well-known *Drosera* and *Pinguicula* to the more obscure (to the general public) *Ibicella*, *Roridula*, and *Triphyophyllum*.

The following years, I would produce further similar work (pencil illustrations mainly): *Nepenthes* illustrations included in taxonomical descriptions of new species (*N. nigra*, *N. pantaronensis*, *N. talaandig*, *N. amabilis* (now *N. sumagaya*), *N. justinae*), various color sketches of *Sarracenia* and *Darlingtonia* for Redfern's Sarraceniaceae of North America monograph, as well as a short series of inked botanical plates for Redfern again: two *Utricularia* plates (one showing *Utricularia intermedia* and the other highlighting bladderwort trap mechanism), *Drosera anglica* and *Pinguicula vulgaris*. These last four were published in Carnivorous Plants of Britain and Ireland.

In 2016, I was commissioned to produce a plate showing *Pinguicula gypsicola* and *P. lusitanica* as well as a *Pinguicula mesophytica* watercolor for Redfern's two-volume monographs on the genus *Pinguicula*. Currently, my last scientific illustration is a botanical plate for a new *Nepenthes* species



*Nepenthes diabolica* A.Bianchi, Chi.C.Lee., Golos, Mey, M.Mansur & A.S.Rob. (formerly "Red Hamata Hairy").

from Sulawesi (*Nepenthes diabolica* A.Bianchi, Chi.C.Lee., Golos, Mey, M.Mansur & A.S.Rob.) known informally in horticultural circles, since 2004, under the name *Nepenthes* “Red Hamata Hairy”. I started this illustration in late 2018 and finished it more than one year later. I was delighted to have it ‘Highly Commended’ in the 2020 Margaret Flockton Award contest for my first participation. I reckon overall that that is not a lot of work for more than a decade of activity, but like I said, botanical illustration was until recently only a side interest. I was working at the time on a graphic novel of nearly 200 pages on top of the commitments of a full-time job as a teacher.

MARCEL: On Facebook and Instagram you show your work in progress in your A Garden’s Chronicle. How many hours does an average drawing take?

FRANÇOIS: It depends on the type of illustration. Lately, I was commissioned for a *Sarracenia* natural hybrid watercolor that required about 30 hours. I am currently working on a large *Nepenthes clipeata* watercolor that will likely exceed the 60 hours mark. I am slow unfortunately. The fact is I like to take pauses, listen to new music, browsing books, watering and talking to my plants, get distracted... I guess I could do a fine illustration in a few hours, but then I would see too many flaws. That being said, I still do see tons of flaws even after 60 hours spent on a piece. Actually, most of the time, flaws, as well as my own limits, are all I can see at the end of a piece. But luckily for me some people get enthusiastic with my work and then I feel much better.

MARCEL: What is the most difficult part of a carnivorous plant to draw?

FRANÇOIS: For me? Intricate foliage. *Drosera magnifica* and *Drosophyllum lusitanicum* were mini nightmares to draw. Sundew and the likes are often very two-dimensional so it’s hard to make them alive in the paper and I guess I sometimes lack the patience to work on some important details that would improve the whole illustration and I unfortunately rush a bit. I am correcting this poor attitude in my current works. I know I also need to improve the light rendition of the dewy species mucilage, but it’s hard to succeed without using a dark background, something I was not interested in doing so far. I will probably do it eventually for the next sundew pieces. I am very impressed when I see detailed drawings or paintings of plants with complex foliage. Look at how Rogério Lupo handled *Drosera magnifica* or Sansanee Deekrajang’s recent rendition of *Pinus sylvestris*. Breathtaking.

MARCEL: Much of your latest art shows species in their habitat which is a totally different style from the more technical botanical illustrations for scientific papers. Do you prefer either style?

FRANÇOIS: I stuck to pencil and black and white botanical illustration for years, but in 2016 I was commissioned to do that watercolor painting for Redfern’s two-volume *Pinguicula* monograph. On that occasion, I imagined a scene where the Central American *Pinguicula mesophytica* would be pollinated by the hummingbird *Lampornis vidiripallens*. That was the first time I would depart a bit from science. While the depiction of the plant and the bird were scientifically correct, there was no recorded proof that the hummingbird was one of the carnivorous plant pollinators. It was just a possibility as they occur in the same region. For the first time, I let imagination slip into one of my botanical works. Imagination and phantasmagoria were things that I tried to smother in my botanical work while they were free flowing in my graphic novel project. When I quit drawing the comic book in late 2017, I was not able to hold a pencil or a brush for months, for almost the next 2 years in fact. At the beginning of 2018, my life got into drastic changes on a personal level and the year and





*Drosera cistiflora*.

a half that would follow was a long process of not only building myself back as a person, but also as an artist. The botanical plate of *Nepenthes* “Red Hamata Hairy” was the unique drawing I would complete in these 2 years. A faint spark in a desert of white endless sheets. I felt no pleasure nor joy doing it; I saw it more like a way of keeping myself more or less alive as an artist. Eventually, as I was feeling better and in peace, I longed to draw again. Not comic books, as I finally understood

this was not my path and that I had to move onto something else. I had realized (although I suspected that well before that time, but was then far from ready to accept the idea) that all these years, what I deemed secondary –botanical illustration– was making me happy while comic book –that I thought was essential to me– was profoundly hurting me, because of the inner nature of the personal story I was trying to convey. Thus, I decided to give botanical illustration a chance. However, I couldn't resign myself to the classical botanical plate showing an isolated plant on a white background. The need of telling a story, creating an atmosphere was still strong and so in November 2019, I drew the discovery of *Nepenthes pervillei* by the French horticulturist Auguste Pervillé. This imaginary scene depicts in a quite dramatic way the moment Pervillé would discover the Seychelles pitcher plant, an unknown species to science at the time. It is not difficult to detect the comic book influence in that piece. Similarly, I would try to create a kind of atmosphere in the following works: *Drosera magnifica*, *Heliamphora macdonaldae*, *Utricularia delphinioides*, *Cephalotus follicularis*, *Sarracenia leucophylla*. Although these paintings are merely a few months old, I have mixed feelings about them; they are more like transition works. However, the comic book experience taught me that it is now mandatory for me to finish what I'm undertaking whether I am happy or not with it.

After this first series of habitat watercolors, I decided to try a more classical approach with my versions of *Drosophyllum lusitanicum*, *Nepenthes epiphytica*, and *N. mapuluensis*. I draw satisfaction from both style of illustrations, I like the codes of the classical botanical plate where one tried to express as much as possible in a delimited relatively narrow frame and with a set of rules. I see it like writing a sonnet in poetry (sorry, that's the French literature teacher waking up) while drawing and painting a plant in habitat require other skills. As a matter of fact, illustrating a plant in habitat is also a tradition in botanical illustration albeit arguably less popular than the classical plate with isolated plant. My approach to the habitat painting might be a bit different than the tradition though, as I do not only want to depict the plant's environment, but also want to create an atmosphere and to suggest some feelings. These days, I am starting a series of paintings that will see me favor this approach: an accurate depiction of plants with a personal vision, the expression of the feelings that overwhelmed me when I saw the plants in habitat or what I felt when I imagined them while reading about their habitat.

So, no favored style really, but rather a quest for exploration. I am planning to do several short series of illustrations in the next months: group of species gathered in vintage posters with captions; plants growing in dramatic cliff; carnivorous plants lurking in mossy forest with a fantastic and eerie atmosphere and more classical black and white botanical plates. I am also on the verge of starting non strictly botanical illustrations: paintings inspired by nature, plants, and (personal) tales. I guess my need of telling a story is coming back in some way.

MARCEL: If you could only make just one more drawing, which species would it be?

FRANÇOIS: Very likely, the man-eating tree from Madagascar. Or –hoping not sounding too ambitious or arrogant– the definitive Venus Fly Trap illustration, the one painting or drawing people would immediately refer to when looking for an image of this iconic species.

MARCEL: So, not so long ago you started selling your drawings, what made you decide to do that?

FRANÇOIS: Two different reasons: making peace with drawing, with art, as a whole, as it used to be very painful for a long time and funding new botanical trips as a researcher. Despite these troubled times, there's still much to discover and I want to get lost in the wild again. Bar two expeditions, all





*Nepenthes pervillei*.



*Cephalotus follicularis*.

my past botanical trips have been covered at my own expense. It seems to me that selling botanical illustrations is quite an elegant way to fund botanical trips that will result in documenting rare species or discovering new ones.

MARCEL: Besides drawings you now offer stickers and bookmarks, how did you come to add those to your repertoire?

FRANÇOIS: That's part of my modern adventure. Starting to sell prints and drawings helped me to connect with people (you need to when you create, advertise, and sell) to be less reclusive like I was when I was comic-book drawing (although I used to go out and give CP lectures on a regular basis). I found out that bookmarks and stickers are quite sought after. Hence, I decided to produce a few. I see them as a way to expand my offer and to achieve my goal faster: funding botanical expeditions, immersing myself into Nature again, documenting plants as a taxonomist and a botanical illustrator, and coming back before leaving again. This is a loop I thrive to get lost into until the end.

MARCEL: So, I'm curious. Can we expect other products featuring your art too? Say, fridge magnets, coffee mugs?

FRANÇOIS: Vintage posters with groups of species and captions are scheduled as I mentioned. For examples, I am toying with the idea of making a *Nepenthes* of Mount Kinabalu poster, one with the *Sarracenia flava* varieties, two with all the *Heliamphora* species, and maybe one with the now four Queensland sisters. Maybe a calendar. An art book certainly. I have considered fridge magnets and mugs and they might be available, likely in very limited quantities, but I am still hesitating as I mainly want to stick with stationery items that I can produce from scratch in my studio.

MARCEL: Every field has great names and there are many botanical artists. Do you have anyone who you really admire for their style and/or skill?

FRANÇOIS: That's such a vast question. When I started to sell prints, I got advice from my three teenage children to use social media actively to promote my work. I created a web shop on Etsy (always under the guidance of my children, especially my eldest daughter); I started to use my Facebook and Instagram accounts, first created to promote my natural history blog ("A Garden's Chronicle"), to now highlight my botanical illustrations. Thanks to Facebook and Instagram algorithms, I found out, these last 8 months, about the existence of my peers. It was a real shock.

I didn't suspect the world of botanical illustration to be so creative and diverse. I was overwhelmed and spent nights in awe. There were talents everywhere, so many gifted people and awe-inspiring art. I had spent years investigating the art of comic book, but was completely ignorant of what was going on in botanical illustration. I was turned upside down when I was confronting to this whole new universe.

These days, I am always looking forward to seeing the new posts or work of great illustrators such as Claire Felloni, Lucy Smith, Deborah Lambkin, Anna Voystekhovitch, Esmée Winkels, Rogério Lupo, Marney Ward, Eunike Nugroho, Jessica Shepherd, Ingrid Elias, or Anna Mason, but there are many many more that I could mention. Closer to me, I have a lot of respect for my botanist friend Alastair Robinson who has started illustrating plants more or less at the same time as me and has improved tremendously over the years. As a general rule, I favor artists who have a clear signature and style, that I can recognize almost immediately, who clearly propose their personal rendition





*Sarracenia leucophylla.*

of a plant; people who don't compromise on the accuracy of science and at the same time try not to simply copy a photograph. Don't get me wrong, painting using a couple of pictures as references and making your piece looking like a photo obviously requires a blatant talent (that I don't have), but that is a prowess that leaves me completely unmoved. Equally as admirable and appealing to me, maybe more, are the beautifully strange creations of illustrators inspired by plants and nature in general such as Fay Helfer, Stephanie Law, Florence Legendre, Stéphanie Ledoux (although she's mainly doing portraits), or Lauren Marx. They're creating paths I want to explore as well while making my own.

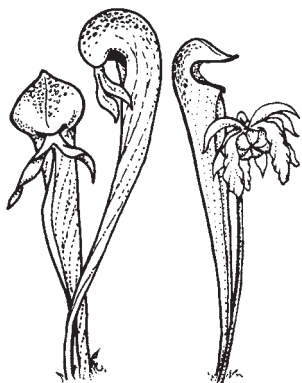
All these artists –almost all women– are inspiring and challenging. They keep me invigorated and I now need my daily fix of their wizardry. Not to mention that many of them turned out to be exquisite people to interact with.

MARCEL: Thank you François and I hope you will be back in the field soon, but please do continue to use your drawings as means of funding as many people love them.

For those who haven't found François' great and very reasonably priced work, which I highly recommend: He has a shop hosted by Etsy: <https://www.etsy.com/fr/shop/Agardenschronicle>







# CARNIVOROUS PLANT NEWSLETTER

Journal of the International  
Carnivorous Plant Society  
[www.carnivorousplants.org](http://www.carnivorousplants.org)

Volume 49, Number 4  
December 2020



**Front Cover:** Plants of a 'paddle-leaf' form of *Drosera capensis* regrowing after winter dormancy at the top of the Gydo Pass. Photo by Robert Gibson. Article on page 173.

**Back Cover:** *Nepenthes mapuluensis* illustration by François Sockhom Mey. Article on page 148.

Carnivorous Plant Newsletter is dedicated to spreading knowledge and news related to carnivorous plants. Reader contributions are essential for this mission to be successful. Do not hesitate to contact the editors with information about your plants, conservation projects, field trips, or noteworthy events. Advertisers should contact the editors. Views expressed in this publication are those of the authors, not the editorial staff.

All correspondence regarding dues, address changes and missing issues should be sent to the Membership Coordinator at the ICPS. Do not send such correspondence to the editors. Checks for subscriptions should be made to the International Carnivorous Plant Society in US funds. Dues, including a subscription, are \$30 per year.

International Carnivorous Plant Society, Inc.  
2121 N. California Blvd., Suite 290  
Walnut Creek, CA 94596-7351, USA  
[icps@carnivorousplants.org](mailto:icps@carnivorousplants.org)

President  
Vice President  
Secretary  
Treasurer  
Board Member  
Board Member  
Board Member  
Board Member  
Board Member  
Membership Coordinator  
Webmaster  
Media Coordinator  
Seed Bank Manager  
CPN Editors  
Managing Editor  
Editor  
Editor  
Editor  
Science Editor  
Science Editor  
Science Editor

Richard Nunn, [richardnunn@carnivorousplants.org](mailto:richardnunn@carnivorousplants.org)  
John Brittnacher, [john@carnivorousplants.org](mailto:john@carnivorousplants.org)  
Cindy Slezak, [cindy@carnivorousplants.org](mailto:cindy@carnivorousplants.org)  
Daniela Ribbecke, [daniela@carnivorousplants.org](mailto:daniela@carnivorousplants.org)  
Kenny Coogan, Education Director, [kenny@carnivorousplants.org](mailto:kenny@carnivorousplants.org)  
Brent Jones, [brent@carnivorousplants.org](mailto:brent@carnivorousplants.org)  
Jan Schlauer, Cultivar Registrar, [jan@carnivorousplants.org](mailto:jan@carnivorousplants.org)  
Carson Trexler, Conservation Director, [carson@carnivorousplants.org](mailto:carson@carnivorousplants.org)  
Bob Ziemer, [bob@carnivorousplants.org](mailto:bob@carnivorousplants.org)  
Cindy Slezak, [cindy@carnivorousplants.org](mailto:cindy@carnivorousplants.org)  
John Brittnacher, [john@carnivorousplants.org](mailto:john@carnivorousplants.org)  
Chad Williams, [chad@carnivorousplants.org](mailto:chad@carnivorousplants.org)  
Joe Griffin, [joe@carnivorousplants.org](mailto:joe@carnivorousplants.org)  
[editor@carnivorousplants.org](mailto:editor@carnivorousplants.org)  
Bob Ziemer  
Barry Rice  
Karl Herold  
John Brittnacher  
Andreas Fleischmann  
Fernando Rivadavia  
Jan Schlauer

Date of effective publication of the September 2020 issue of Carnivorous Plant Newsletter: August 6, 2020.

The ICPS is the International Cultivar Registration Authority (ICRA) for the names of cultivated carnivorous plants according to the International Code of Nomenclature for Cultivated Plants. Send relevant correspondence to the ICPS, Inc.

Carnivorous Plant Newsletter is published quarterly in March, June, September, and December by the ICPS, Inc., 2121 N. California Blvd., Suite 290, Walnut Creek, CA 94596, USA. Periodicals postage paid at Walnut Creek, CA and additional mailing offices. Postmaster: Send address changes to ICPS, Inc., 2121 N. California Blvd., Suite 290, Walnut Creek, CA 94596, USA. Printed by Allen Press, Inc., 810 E. 10th Street, Lawrence, KS 66044. Logo and masthead art: Paul Milauskas. © 2020 International Carnivorous Plant Society. All rights reserved. ISSN #0190-9215