

## SURVIVING THE PANDEMIC

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This is a universally accepted truth: organisms which best adapt to suit their environment have the highest chances of survival. No plant, animal, or person exists in stasis, and the natural history of our world is rich with stories which all center a common theme: adapt or perish. As cultivators and sellers of carnivorous plants, the stakes in our nursery aren't usually so dramatic. When COVID-19 struck and brought the world to a halt, it was immediately clear we were facing a test unlike any other. What wasn't clear was if – and how – California Carnivores would survive the pandemic.

At the end of March 2020, the doors were closed to the public as Sonoma County entered a strict Shelter in Place ordinance. Damon Collingsworth and Daniela Ribbecke needed to lay off staff. Damon and Daniela took on all the work that had previously required a team of 5 people. They packed and shipped mail order, kept on top of office work and customer service, made new plants, and maintained the collection all while having no idea when it would end or what would come next. As March dragged into April, they acknowledged that what we all were experiencing would be a marathon and not a sprint. What wasn't clear was how long they could maintain momentum and survive.

Every week of those first few months was more tiring than the last. So many loyal customers were wonderful and understanding of the reduced capacity and speed, but they also experienced a new level of anger directed in ways never previously experienced. Because of the public closure, Damon and Daniela had to turn people away at the gate; most were understanding, but some were frustrated and angry. For more than a month, they agonized over every decision: can we safely bring anyone back yet? Are we making the right choice keeping our staff at home? As a small business, we were so lucky not to lose sales during this time, but neither were we sure what we could continue to count on.

As luck would have it, a sort of houseplant Renaissance evolved as lockdowns across the world extended through the year. People who had never been interested in gardening looked around their spaces and quickly sought to fill them with life. As this collective interest in plants grew, so did sales; it seemed they quadrupled overnight. In June 2020 it felt safe with appropriate protocols to start slowly bringing team members back, one by one, to catch up on sales and begin planning once again for the future. I was hired to handle the administrative duties and customer service.

California Carnivores has always been many things to all of us – retail nursery, lush botanical wonderland, meeting place for horticulturalists and hobbyists of all ages. We've always known how lucky we are and how special it is to be able to devote our lives to something so unique and meaningful. But the realities of operating a highly specialized retail space in an increasingly uncertain world had been creeping in at the edges for a while, even before Covid struck. Online sales did not just carry us through the pandemic; they allowed us to thrive as a business in ways that weren't previously possible. We made the decision to become online-only and close our public retail space. This is an adaptation that was difficult emotionally but necessary to the continued success of the business.

As plant people, we delight in the natural world and have devoted our lives to preserving its many wonders. As businesspeople, we are immeasurably grateful that social media and our digital connections have allowed us to survive a global tragedy. Change is a critical component of every life cycle, and every organism must adapt to these changes in order to survive. We feel so much hope when we think about the millions of new plant people who now enjoy a deeper connection to nature thanks to the tools of social media, and we will continue to use these tools to share our love, knowledge, and passion for carnivorous plants with the world.