

DEALING WITH LOSS AS A HORTICULTURIST

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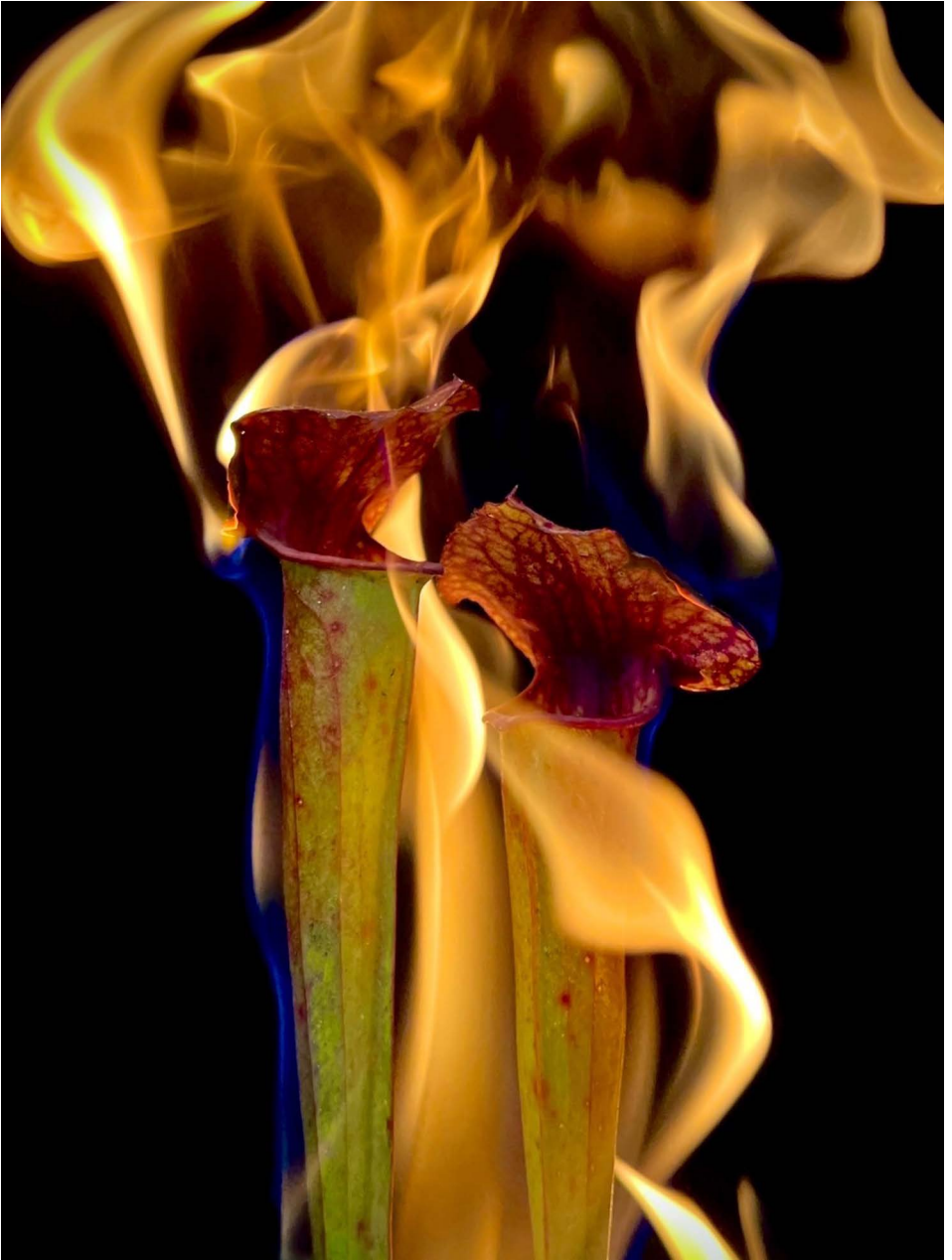
A much younger version of myself accompanied my mother to a local garden center, only to be entranced by a *Drosera spatulata*, etiolated and haphazardly buried in a tight puck of sphagnum – being tossed directly under the Florida sun resulted in its quick demise. This is my first recollection of grieving a plant's death.

As the years passed, my interest turned into a sick obsession. Ritualistically catering to their needs, which in turn spiderwebbed into studying every little nuance regarding their cultivation. Now that I'd prowled seven different forums for everyone's personal opinions on perlite size, it was time to memorize the full reproductive cycle of whatever pests were plaguing that month's featured victim of neglect. Questions that began as "How to Kill Thrips" slowly evolved into a neurotic spiral of ruminating on where my place in nature was and how the action of killing thrips could inadvertently make me the reason for a whole colony of aquatic fauna being harmed. As my affinity for these plants grew, so did the guilt that mounted after every successful demise in my collection.

Occasionally, I'll stumble upon a half-deteriorated tag from my childhood. The bits of plastic having long outlived what accompanied them. A stark reminder of the environmental damage many of us contribute to in order to keep these plants alive. But what choice do we have? Part of the allure for many hobbyists lies in our ability to garden, to purchase some of the most sought-after specimens on a whim, and to use plants as a vice to forget anything outside of our pampered collection. Our selling point as a community being that these plants are possible to grow on your own. The novelty of cultivation usurping their need for conservation due to our lust for a *Sarracenia flava* with shorter pitchers, or the next mutt involving *Nepenthes veitchii* to be released.

Delving further into these plants as a way to lose myself has only resulted in inescapably being forced to face the bleak reality of our world. Spraying down my greenhouse with Imidacloprid is now accompanied by a churning anxiety of knowing how much is truly being damaged to keep a relatively small number of plants straggling along through our recurrent "Record Breaking" heat-waves. Since it's evidently impossible to escape fate's looming presence over us and humanity's innate interest in controlling organisms, death becomes an unavoidable factor when working with life on such a close level. What is to be done with the resulting emotions from losing valuable plants?

While I wish this article could end with an ambiguous "nothing", it feels like an answer far too many of us cling to in hopes that an omnipotent being will zap away environmental destruction, climate change, and snow scale. An elephant in the room for many *Sarracenia* collectors is the amount of fungicides required for successful cultivation. Ironically, these issues are plaguing southern growers who live close to native *Sarracenia* populations. In addition to liberal applications of whatever carcinogen is at hand, unstable weather has resulted in many plants being unable to successfully go dormant. Frequently waking up in the middle of December, rarely surviving three or four years without artificial intervention. More often than not, I find myself contemplating the sacrifice of my collection in order to cut back on environmental damage, an inevitable byproduct of living in the world we've created. Wondering which form of loss I'd rather cope with.



In my humble opinion, the best way to dispose of contaminated material.



Nepenthes truncata [(*ventricosa* x *sibuyanensis*) x *merrilliana*] bred by Exotica Plants, another plant to meet an early demise. While being one of my favorite species, I've always found *N. truncata* and its affiliated hybrids to be pathogen-prone in the warmer months. While it's possible to grow them in lowland conditions, respecting their need for appropriately oxygenated media is heavily recommended.

the general public's eye, it's imperative to remember where we stand as educators. Normalize the discussion of the emotions we feel after losing a plant and how small actions could amount to their environment's collapse. Furthermore, challenge the ways we introduce the populus to carnivorous plants.

Acknowledgement: A special thanks to my friends and family who put up with incessant ramblings about nature, overzealous enthusiasts that drive me to do the opposite of what is considered the norm, and the sole *Drosera spatulata* whose immolation ignited an inextinguishable passion for horticulture.

Reference

Pokorny, K., and Brewer, L.J. 2022. Harvesting peat moss contributes to climate change. Oregon State University, Newsroom (December 9, 2022). <https://today.oregonstate.edu/news/harvesting-peat-moss-contributes-climate-change-oregon-state-scientist-says>

Unfortunately, we are reaching a point where these problems are falling directly onto the shoulders of younger generations. Issues like this can only be fundamentally solved by having proper education from the top down. By building upon an extremely delicate balance between enticing new enthusiasts with the joy of growing these plants and being direct with their dire need for protection in the wild. A personally difficult pill to swallow was discovering that peat bogs, while only taking up around 5% of Earth's surface, contain more carbon than all of the forests on our entire planet combined (Pokorny & Brewer 2022). Requiring decades to stop releasing carbon after being exploited and replanted under the guise of being "renewable." Is it appropriate for the largest plant nurseries to promote the heavy use of peat? On the other hand, how else will they make it accessible for the everyman to own a flytrap?

This isn't to discredit the increasing number of truly passionate horticulturists who are tirelessly working to create sustainable media, or lights with lower energy requirements. But the prices will of course reflect this, further bottlenecking these plants into a niche clique of privileged people who can afford to grow things sustainably. It's quite a maddening cycle that will most likely outlast the plastic tags from my childhood.

As our community becomes more visible to