

Growing Native Carnivorous Plants

PLANTS THAT EAT BUGS!

Carnivorous plants have fascinated generations of gardeners. Who can resist the allure of plants that eat bugs? Several distinct kinds of plants fall into the carnivorous category. In the southeastern United States we have:

- Butterworts (*Pinguicula*)
- Bladderworts (*Utricularia*)
- Sundews (*Drosera*)
- Pitcher plants (*Sarracenia*)
- Venus flytraps (*Dionaea*)

The Southeast in particular is home to an incredible variety of pitcher plants.

Venus flytraps have an even more restricted range: they're found only in the southeastern corner of North Carolina and a few adjacent counties in South Carolina.



GROWING CARNIVOROUS PLANTS

Carnivorous plants are best grown outside in a situation that reasonably replicates their natural habitat. They are hardy, and although you may want to display one indoors for a short time, they do best outdoors and are no more appropriate for a prolonged indoor stay than other hardy native plants, such as Jack-in-the-pulpit or trillium.

The following growing instructions focus on pitcher plants and Venus flytraps, but they can be applied generally to almost all southeastern native carnivorous plants.



Growing medium

Look for a highly acidic mix that retains moisture. One of the best and most common is peatmoss. You can use plain peatmoss or peatmoss mixed with coarse sand or perlite to prevent the medium from packing down and hampering root growth. A good mix consists of $\frac{3}{4}$ **peatmoss and** $\frac{1}{4}$ **coarse sand or coarse perlite**. Peatmoss has an initial tendency to resist moisture, so you should premoisten it before planting by mixing in a little water by hand. The mix should be moist to the touch but not produce water when squeezed in the

Containers

Glazed clay pots or plastic containers are best because they reduce evaporation. Of those, plastic is easier to drill holes into. Pitcher plants can live for years if divided and repotted every three or four years. The best time for repotting is early spring, just before new growth begins, or late fall.

For larger collections, a plastic dishpan or similar container can be used to create a “minibog.” Drill a few holes along the sides of the pan one inch below the surface of the growing medium to allow excess water to drain while also enabling the peat to retain plenty of moisture.

Watering

If your carnivorous plants are in individual plastic pots, keep a shallow tray of water under the container at all times. The water should be no higher than ½ to 1 inch up the side of the pot, just enough to allow the growing medium access to water at all times during the growing season. **The rule of thumb with carnivorous plants is: if in doubt, water.**

Never allow them to dry out! These plants are adapted to habitats with a very high water table and depend on constant moisture. Although they're not aquatic plants, they're accustomed to savannas, pocosins, bogs, and ditch margins where soils are generally moist or saturated seasonally.

Fertilization

These green plants manufacture their own food by photosynthesis, and they get nutritional supplements from the insects they capture. So should you fertilize them? Contrary to the advice of most current literature, the answer is a tentative yes.

Our work here at the North Carolina Botanical Garden shows that pitcher plants, especially young ones, benefit from monthly applications of ¼ strength or less water soluble fertilizer, applied no more often than once every 25 to 30 days, during the active growing season only. Discontinue fertilization in late summer.

But remember, all carnivorous plants are extremely sensitive to overfertilization.

Sunlight

In the wild, most carnivorous plants grow in open bogs and open grassy savannas with very little shade. They are sun-loving plants. Without at least six hours of direct sunlight, they become misshapen. **Place your cultivated carnivorous plants in open, sunny spots** in the yard, garden, deck, patio, or porch.

Although they need direct sunlight, carnivorous plants do not like excessive heat. Place them in areas with adequate ventilation. (One advantage of growing plants in containers is that you can move them to different locations as the growing season progresses and patterns of sun and shade change.)

Dormancy

Carnivorous plants are hardy perennials. Not only can they survive the dormancy brought on by cold winter temperatures, they require it!

Allow your plants to go

dormant by keeping them outside for the

winter. You can protect them from extreme cold by digging a small hole in your yard and burying the whole container up to its rim in the garden. Monitor them every week or so until the ground freezes to be sure the medium does not dry out; even in their dormant stage, they must not become dry. In spring remove them from their winter site and place in a sunny spot for summer display.

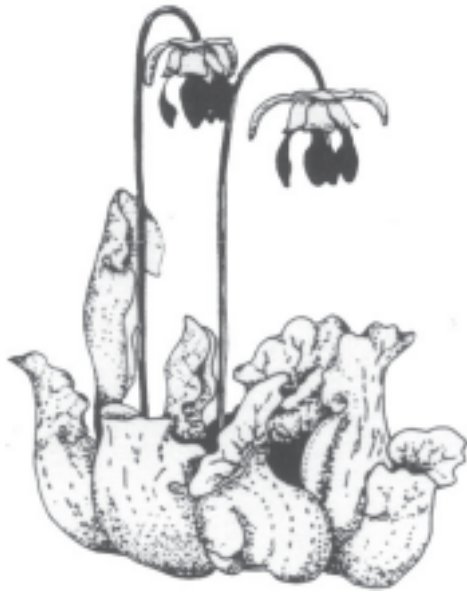
BE AN ETHICAL GARDENER

Because carnivorous plants are slow-growing, many nurseries either collect plants from the wild or buy wild-collected plants wholesale.

Why is a wild-collected plant not as desirable as a nursery-propagated plant? Wild collection threatens wild populations of these species, many of which are rare. Many wild-collected plants, acquired illegally from public and private lands, change hands several times and receive rough treatment before reaching retail outlets, so they may not be healthy.

Support conservation and native plant nurseries that propagate their own material by refusing to buy carnivorous plants whose origin is in question.

NORTH CAROLINA BOTANICAL GARDEN
100 Old Mason Farm Road
Chapel Hill, NC 27517
ncbg.unc.edu | 919-962-0522



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