SCARY CARNIVOROUS PLANTS

Halloween is only a few days away. Ghouls, goblins, ghosts, witches, and man-eating plants will be roaming the streets. Well, maybe not the man-eating plants, as seen in “Little Shop of Horrors”, but possibly insect-eating plants. Insect-eating plants or carnivorous plants are fun to grow and collect and what a better time of year to start your collection of these scary insect-eating plants, at Halloween time.

Florida has dozens of native species of carnivorous plants; more than any other state in the U.S. They’re found in the panhandle, but can also be easily found in bogs here in Central Florida. There are several kinds of carnivorous plants found naturally in Florida. They include sundews, butterworts, bladderworts, and pitcher plants.

Now how do these insect-eating plants actually attract their prey? They use their appealing scents to lure the insects to them. Once on the plant, the leaves will trap the insects and sticky fluids will imprison them. The insects attracted by the carnivorous plants are necessary for the plants survival. The insects provide the essential nutrients needed by the plant to grow in an otherwise poor, nutrient deprived soil. Once trapped, the carnivorous plants will produce digestive fluids that absorb the insect and its nutrients.

One of the most popular types of carnivorous plant to grow is the Venus flytrap (Dionaea muscipula). Named after Diana, the Greek goddess of love and beauty, the Venus flytrap is a native species to the Southeastern United States. It is very showy and interesting with its jaw-like traps. (Image courtesy of Botanical Society of America)

The Venus flytrap uses its modified leaves or “jaws” as the insect traps. These traps are classified as active traps. This means that there is actual movement of the plant’s leaves to capture the insects. The Venus flytrap lures its prey as other carnivorous plants do, with its sweet-smelling nectar. The insect is attracted to the nectar and when it lands on the plant in search of this nectar, it triggers tiny hairs located on the modified leaves.

In order to catch the insect, the “jaws” snap shut quickly after being triggered. Once the prey is caught, the Venus flytrap secretes an enzyme that will dissolve the body of the insect, supplying the plant with the necessary nutrients for its survival. After a few days, the plant is ready for another meal and re-opens, awaiting its next victim.

However, don’t get too excited about using the Venus flytrap as an alternative way of trying to swat those pesky flies in your home. These plants will only consume two to three flies each month!

You can easily grow your own Venus flytrap. They can usually be found in many of the retail garden shops. The first step to growing your own carnivorous plant is to prepare the planting container. Do not use regular plant potting soil. These plants will grow best when sphagnum peat moss is used for the soil medium. This also can be found at most garden centers.
Carnivorous plants need a humid environment. A terrarium is ideal. Plants grown in aquariums or terrariums will receive adequate humidity, but make sure to leave the top of the container open for air circulation.

The Venus flytrap is also very picky about their water. Never use regular tap water. It contains too many other chemicals that are toxic to carnivorous plants. The best water to use would be either rainwater or distilled water. Bottled drinking or spring water is also off limits. They have salts and minerals added back to the water to make it taste better.

Direct full sunlight is necessary for the health of the Venus flytrap. At least six to eight hours of it a day is needed. When the plant received adequate sunlight, the leaves and veins will turn red. If you plan on keeping the plant inside, a light consisting of two 40-watt fluorescent light bulbs set a few inches above the plant should be used.

Remember that growing a Venus flytrap is like having a pet, especially if you grow it inside because you will need to provide its food for the Venus Fly Trap. When the leaves turn a red color, it means they are hungry and ready to eat.

Don’t be scared of these insect-eating plants. They are only dangerous to those that are smaller than the average insect. Even if you fall into a bed of carnivorous plants, they will not consume you. So, instead of fearing them, embrace them and have fun. They can provide many hours of entertainment and fun for your entire family.

For more information on carnivorous plants or answers to other gardening questions, contact the Osceola County Master Gardeners at (321)-697-3000. They are available to take your calls Monday thru Friday from 10am to 2pm.

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