

This changes everything

Plant-based internet Forget videos by gamers or influencers. The best livestream of the year so far was of a corpse flower slowly blooming on an Oregon farm, says **Annalee Newitz**



Annalee Newitz is a science journalist and author. Their latest book is *Stories Are Weapons: Psychological warfare and the American mind*. They are the co-host of the Hugo-winning podcast *Our Opinions Are Correct*. You can follow them @annaleen and their website is techsploitation.com

Annalee's week

What I'm reading

The Light Eaters by Zoë Schlanger, about the complex lives of plants.

What I'm watching

Weird alternate history series My Lady Jane, where Lady Jane Grey marries a magical horse.

What I'm working on

Growing wildflowers in my garden.

This column appears monthly. Up next week: Rowan Hooper

WHEN you think of livestreaming, if indeed you reflect on it at all, you probably imagine a gamer screaming about shooting the final boss. Or a conspiracy influencer "just asking questions" about why aliens are running Parliament. It is all very loud, with lots of gifs and sound effects. And yet the best livestream so far this year was quite the opposite: it was three weeks of round-the-clock video of a flower slowly growing at Milk Barn Farm, in a town called Boring in Oregon.

This was no ordinary flower. Former web designer Derek Powazek has run the farm for the past decade and is one of the few people on the planet to grow an *Amorphophallus titanum* in his personal greenhouse. Known colloquially as a corpse flower, *A. titanum* produces the world's largest bloom. "I have never smelled a human decaying, but I'm pretty sure it smells like that," Powazek told me by video from his greenhouse, where he was sitting next to the flower he dubbed Fred. "It was a wall of stench."

Normally these plants only grow in the wilds of Sumatra, Indonesia, where they are fertilised by carrion beetles that are drawn to the stink, the way bees are drawn to flowers. Only a few have been cultivated, mostly at universities and fancy botanical gardens.

I started watching the livestream in mid-July, when the flower reached Powazek's waist. It grew several centimetres every day and looked like a slender, green missile wrapped in a massive, purple-edged chard leaf. By skipping backwards and forwards on the livestream, it was easy to see how much it grew in mere hours. I am no stranger to wildlife webcams – I have followed the melodrama of a local

peregrine falcon nest for years – but this was something different. Watching a plant grow changed the entire tempo of my day. Instead of focusing on deadlines and minute-by-minute news updates, I slipped into plant time, measured by the slant of light through the greenhouse walls.

Powazek planted his *A. titanum* 13 years ago using a seed given to him by a University of Missouri botanist. Fred sprouted while Powazek was still in a cramped San Francisco apartment and he worried what would happen if it flowered. Where would he put a 1.5-metre-tall flower that reeked

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of death? Luckily, it rarely blooms, with most growth cycles producing only a single leaf that looks like a small tree.

In the meantime, Powazek quit his tech job. He and his wife, Heather Champ, moved to Milk Barn Farm, where they learned to rear goats, chickens and turkeys, and grow legal cannabis for CBD oil. Champ still works remotely for a tech firm, while Powazek tends the farm. Fred took up residence in the greenhouse Powazek built for their orchids and other tropical plants.

When Fred bloomed in late July, I watched its leafy wrapper flare open like a skirt, forming what is called a spathe around the missle-shaped spadix. It was as tall as an adult human, and ready to meet the neighbours. Dozens of locals came to admire Fred, some gagging at the smell while others took excited selfies, and hundreds more watched online.

Powazek fertilised Fred on the livestream too, using pollen from another corpse flower with a livestream, at Washington State University in Vancouver, Washington. Biology instructor Dawn Freeman told him to cut a "window" in the thick base of Fred's spathe. Next, he used a tiny paintbrush to reach inside and daub pollen on Fred's female flowers. As he worked, people on Powazek's TikTok begged him not to hurt the plant. "They wanted me to use flies to deliver the pollen – how would I have gotten pollen on the flies?" He smiled. "People got really emotionally involved." Fred took it all quite cheerfully, however, and we got a beautiful view of the tiny pink-and-gold blooms hidden inside.

What is it about extremely slow plant action that we find so emotionally riveting? Powazek thinks it is an escape from a world that feels out of control. "When you're gardening and your hands are dirty, you can't use your phone," he said. "You have to be where you are, giving your love and attention to a thing that is beautiful and isn't going to yell at you on social media."

Still, he did use technology to invite others into his greenhouse. "We forget that social media solves a real problem, which is that we are social creatures and we want to talk to each other. It enabled me to reach out to people and say, 'Look at this cool thing.'" Powazek paused and looked up at the deep-green structure towering over his head. "The way we've built social media brings out our worst selves. It turns everyone into advertisers, looking for attention or money. But it doesn't have to be that way."

More and more people seem to agree with him. I would certainly rather watch a giant, stinky plant grow than talk to an AI chatbot. ■