

Imagine that you're a fly. You're just zipping around the sky, looking for a place to rest, when you see nice pink leaf. That looks like a nice place to land. You think to yourself in your fly head. As you rest your feet on the leaf, you notice something strange. This leaf is hairy. You begin to make your move, but you trigger the plant's reflex. Snap! In one-tenth of a second, you are caught in the Venus flytrap. You will be digested in five to twelve days. Welcome to the world of carnivorous plants!

There are over a quarter of a millions plant species. Only 600 or so are carnivorous. We call them this because they attract, trap, and eat bugs. Like other plants, they get energy from the sun. But unlike other plants, they get their nutrients from their prey. Carnivorous plants live in bogs and places where the soil lacks nutrients. Most plants get nutrients from the soil. Carnivorous plants have turned to other sources.

The snap of the Venus flytrap is not the only way that plants eat bugs. Pitcher plants trick their prey into landing on them. They offer nectar bribes to the foolish insects that would take them. True to their name, pitcher plants have deep chambers. Their landing surface is slippery. They have inward pointing hairs, making it hard to escape. The fly lands on the pitcher plant to eat, but slips

into a pit filled with digestive fluids and is eaten.

Then there're sundews. We call them sundews because they sparkle in the sun as if covered in morning dew. Of course, that sparkle is from something much more treacherous. It is a sweet goo called mucilage that bugs can't resist.

Sundews create mucilage to attract bugs. As they fly in to eat, bugs become trapped in the very object of their desire. They soon exhaust themselves by trying to escape the mucilage. Or the sundew's tentacles, which respond to prey by curling around them, smother them. Bugs usually die in about 15 minutes. Then the plant dissolves its prey in enzymes and absorbs the nutrients.

Have you ever walked into trouble and found that you couldn't get out? So has every insect that has ever wandered into a corkscrew plant. Bugs love to investigate plants for nectar and food.

Corkscrew plants have inviting stems. Curved hairs line the inside of these stems. These hairs allow insects to go up the stems, but not back.

Going forward leads a chamber filled with digestive fluid, the plant's stomach. Bugs who wander into the corkscrew plant find that they are unable to escape. They must march to their own demise.

And then there are the bladderworts. They're about as nice as they sound. They live in water and float near the surface. Their traps are like small bladders

hidden beneath the water. Only their flowers are visible from the surface. When bugs swim into the trigger hairs, the plant reacts. A trapdoor in the bladder opens up. The bladder sucks up the prey and the water surrounding it. A tenth of a second later, the bladder shuts again. The plant has trapped the prey. It releases digestive fluids. The prey will be digested within hours.

Carnivorous plants might sound tough, but they are difficult to keep at home. They are built to survive in places that other plants cannot. This specialization comes at a cost. They have a hard time adapting to other environments. Their strengths become weaknesses in rich soil. They depend on the harsh yet delicate environments in which they thrive. They are not so hardy after all. Still, there's something to be said about the power of life when one finds a plant that can survive in barren soil.