



Venus Flytrap: Queen of the Carnivorous Plants

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A Household Name

The Venus flytrap, *Dionaea muscipula*, is easily the most infamous of carnivorous plants. It attracts, traps, kills, and derives nutrients from animal prey, typically in order to supplement the poor mineral nutrition of the soil in which it grows. Today, over 700 species possessing this specialized suite of adaptations have been identified, and are native to every continent except Antarctica. As the British botanist Joseph Dalton Hooker (1817–1911) once proclaimed, “such vegetable sportsmen as the Sundew, the Venus’s Flytrap, and the Pitcher-Plants” have long been of interest to naturalists and the botanically inclined.¹ The prominent figures that he refers to were indeed significant in the history of carnivorous plants.



⋮ L-R: Pitcher plant (*Sarracenia purpurea*), Venus flytrap... 🗄

Carl Linnaeus, having seen no small number of extraordinary plants in his lifetime, declared the Venus flytrap *miraculum naturae*, “miracle of nature,” in his *Systema Vegetabilium* (1774). Charles Darwin even considered it to be among the “most wonderful” plants in the world.² The story of this carnivorous curiosity highlights transatlantic networks of correspondence and specimen exchange as critical to the rise of early modern botany, and traces the terrifying delights this tiny plant inspired through centuries of visual, poetic, and empirical mediums. Furthermore, this narrative reveals our tendency to anthropomorphize and gender the “Queen of the Carnivorous Plants,” alongside countless other denizens of the plant kingdom.

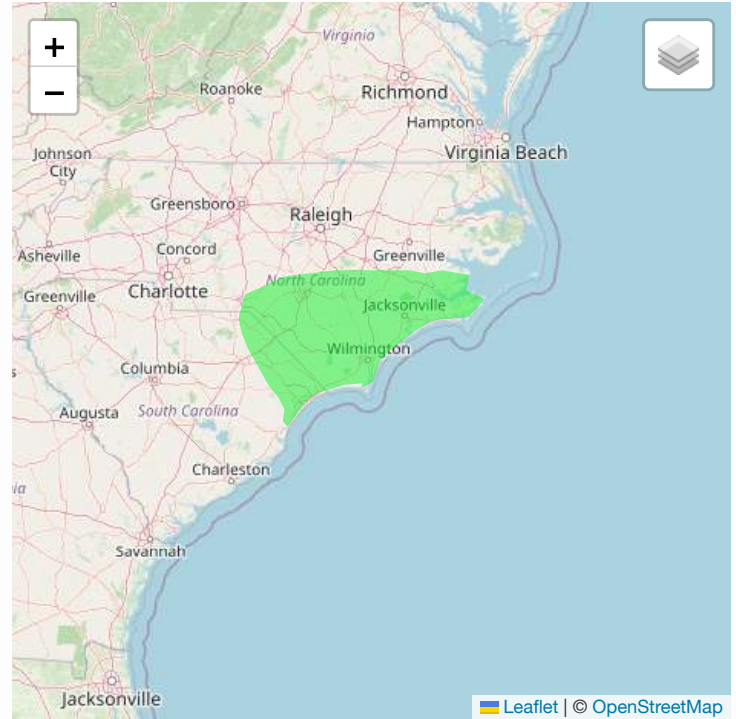


⋮ The wild world of carnivorous plants - Kenny Coogan 🗄

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Discovering Carnivory

In 1759, North Carolina governor Arthur Dobbs related news of a “Catch Fly sensitive” plant to his long-time acquaintance, British botanist Peter Collinson (1694–1768).³ Upon Collinson’s request, the governor provided a more detailed description the following year. In June 1764, Collinson informed John Bartram of Philadelphia, a fellow Quaker naturalist, that he sent a dried leaf of the Venus flytrap, or “Tipitiwichet Sensitive,” to Linnaeus, whom he expected to “be in raptures at the sight of” it.⁴



ⓘ The Venus flytrap's native range is limited to a roughly 5... 🗺

Correspondence between Collinson and Bartram has cast light on the etymological origins of their “Wagish Tipitiwitchet sensitive.” Alluding to the recent marriage of the 73 year-old Dobbs to Justina Davis (1745–1771), 58 years his junior, Collinson wrote to Bartram that “It is now in vain to write to [Dobbs] for seeds or plants of Tipitiwitchet now [that] He has gott one of his own to play with.”⁵ This wry comment suggests that “Tipitiwitchet” was no more than a bawdy pun on the perceived resemblance of the Venus flytrap’s alluring red-lined leaves to female genitalia. Yet the androcentric inclination of early male naturalists to sexualize and gender botanical specimens was not limited exclusively to *Dionaea* or even other carnivorous plants. Eighteenth-century sexual innuendo often relied on botanical metaphors, and [plants sensitive to touch](#) (e.g., *Mimosa pudica*) in particular were considered analogous to male and female sex organs.⁶



ⓘ The Venus flytrap...



ⓘ Grave of Justina Davis Nash, who remarried to Abner...

These earliest accounts of *Dionaea* demonstrated the plant's "femme fatale" allure to English naturalists. This fascination was immortalized through the nomenclature proposed by John Ellis (1710–1776), a British linen merchant and naturalist. *Dionaea muscipula* can be literally translated as "Aphrodite's Mousetrap," conjuring up vivid images of a vegetal love goddess's deadly vulva-shaped trap luring small animals to their deaths. The extent to which such vernacular waggery might have influenced Ellis is unclear, but it has certainly helped to secure the Venus flytrap's place as a popular curiosity with enduring associations to gender and female sexuality.⁷



⋮ Venus Fly Trap drawing with John Ellis' original manuscri... 🗨

Ellis' contemporary William Young (1742–1785), tasked by Queen Charlotte with gathering North American botanical specimens, first brought living Venus flytraps to Europe in 1768. He sent some to James Gordon (1708–1780), a well-known English nurseryman, and continued to advertise them in England and later in France as late as 1783. Although from correspondence we know William Bartram was likely the first to sketch *Dionaea*, Young produced a crudely colored illustration and labeled it *Youngsonia* in his unpublished *A Natural History of Plants* (1767).⁸



William Young, *Mentha* (No....)



William Bartram, *Nelumbo*...

Nearly a decade after its first description by Dobbs, Linnaeus received word from John Ellis, his longtime correspondent, of this mysterious New World plant. In his [23 September 1768 letter](#), Ellis provided a detailed account of the Venus flytrap, in which he described “minute sharp red spines, as if design’d by nature to stick into the insect, that is caught, to prevent it, escape by struggling.”⁹ Linnaeus, who confessed that he had “never seen such a wonderful phenomenon,” presented this “most rare and singular plant *Dionaea*” to the Royal Society of Sciences at Uppsala, relaying to Ellis the Society’s thanks “for the most valuable communication ever received.” Indeed, he considered Ellis’s description so complete that “nothing can be added.”¹⁰ We now understand that Ellis misinterpreted the function of the red spines, which serve as a triggering mechanism for the snap-trap leaves.



Hungry Venus flytraps snap shut on a host of unfortunate flie...

By 1770, Ellis published an edited version of his 1768 letter in his pamphlet *Directions for bringing over seeds and plants, from the East Indies ...*, which included the first published illustration of the Venus flytrap. In another 1768 letter to physician and botanist David Skene (1731–1770), Ellis mentioned that at a meeting of the Royal Society a “Lord Moreton” (likely James Douglas, 14th Earl of Morton) had posed a “Shrewd question ... Do you think Sr that the plant receives any nourishment from the Insects it catches?”¹¹ Put on the spot, Ellis had to admit his ignorance in the matter. Yet this idea seemed to appeal to him, and later he described the plant as having a capacity to *catch food in its leaves*, pointing to the possibility of insects serving as nutriment.



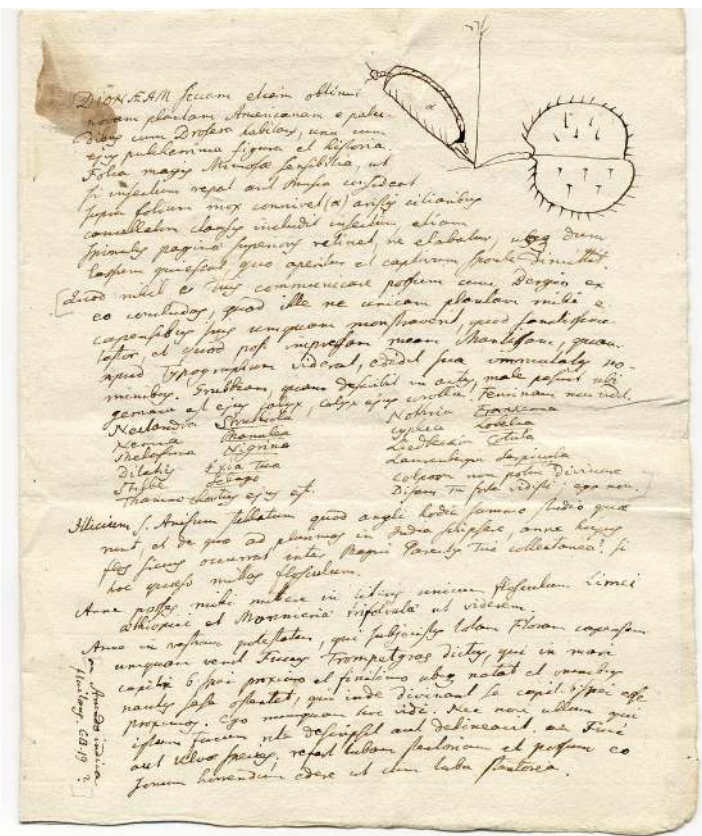
Figure and botanical description of *Dionaea muscipula*...

Ellis’ published 1770 description of *Dionaea* reads “The plant, of which I now enclose you an exact figure ... shows that Nature may have some views towards its nourishment, in forming the upper joint of its leaf like a machine to catch food.”¹² This description of the flytrap’s deadly maw marks a significant shift in his thinking about the plant as compared to his original September 1768 letter to Linnaeus, in which he mentions neither nourishment nor the capacity of the plant to actually kill insect prey.¹³ The complex network of knowledge exchange surrounding the Venus flytrap spanned much of Europe and frequently crossed the Atlantic.



The complex network of knowledge exchange surroundi...

Linnaeus, however, promoted a slightly different narrative within his correspondence network. A [November 1768 letter](#) to Dutch botanist Nicolaas Laurens Burman (1734–1793) sums up his opinion on the matter: “The leaves are more sensitive than those of Mimosa, and if an insect or fly crawls or sits on the leaf, it closes its eyes with hairy scales and spines so that the booty cannot slip out and when the prisoner is tired out, the leaf opens and lets it go.”¹⁴ This notion was later repeated almost verbatim in his [Mantissa Plantarum Altera](#) (1771), erroneously describing a “catch and release” mechanism of sorts.



Linnaeus often included small sketches in his...

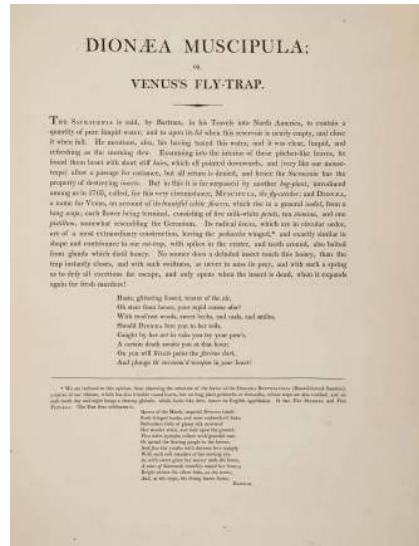


Linnaeus further implored English nurseryman James Gordon for live specimens in 1772, to no avail.¹⁵ He was nonetheless susceptible to the awe *Dionaea* inspired, and his incredulity regarding the deadly trapping mechanism might simply be attributed to the lack of necessary empirical evidence. The flattened, dried, and inert specimens he received from correspondents failed to show the speed and precision of the lethal snap-trap in action and understandably inspired the impression of a sleeping eyelid, as Linnaeus described in his letter to Burman.



⋮ A dried herbarium specimen, similar to the nineteenth-... 📐

Following Linnaeus, *Dionaea* also garnered attention from the American naturalist, politician, and slave owner Thomas Jefferson (1745–1771). His first attempts to collect and share specimens of the Venus flytrap in the United States and abroad occurred in January 1786. And during Jefferson’s stay in Paris that summer, he requested a shipment of “some seeds of the *Dionaea muscipula*,” perhaps to impress the Parisians with the wonders of his young nation.¹⁶ After nearly two decades of sporadic attempts to acquire the precious seeds, he finally obtained some in 1804 toward the end of his first term as President of the United States. Preoccupied by his official duties, Jefferson finally planted them in April 1809, after the end of his second term. From humble beginnings in the swamps and bogs of the Carolinas, the *Venus flytrap* had captured the attention of one of the most prominent figures on the continent.



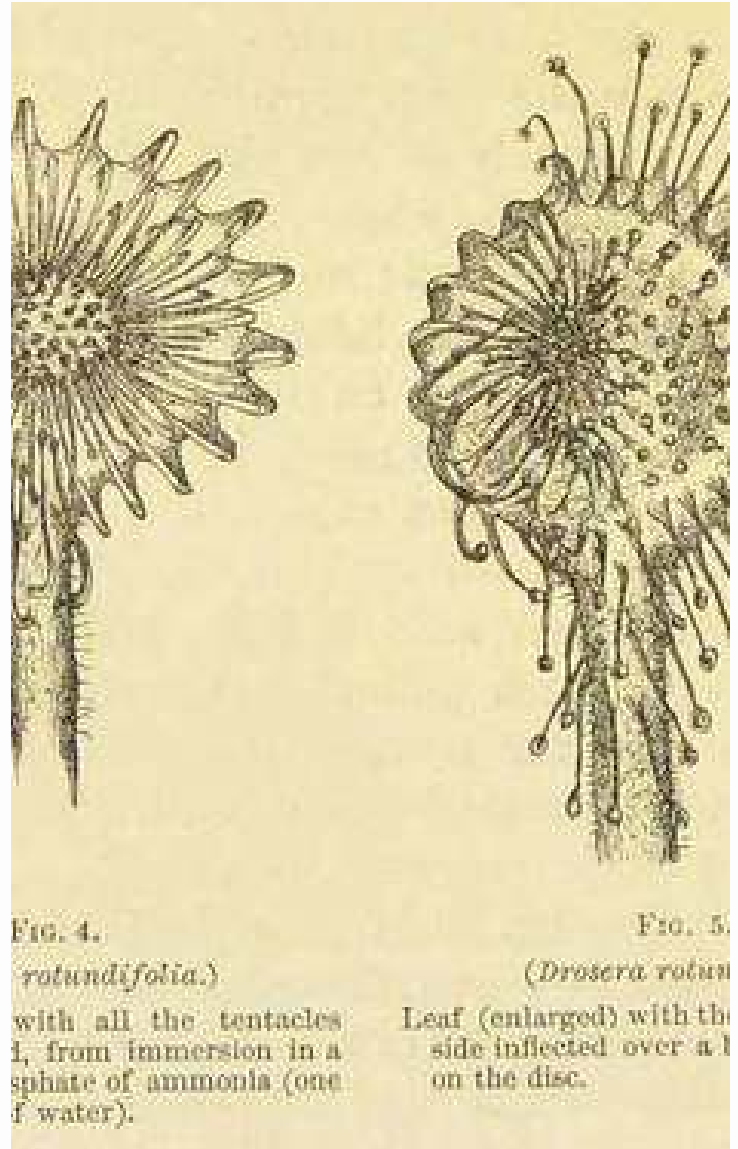
⋮ This image shows two...



⋮ *Dionaea muscipula*; or, Venus...⋮

Darwin's "Most Wonderful" Plants

Charles Darwin (1809–1882), the author of *On the Origin of Species* had displayed great enthusiasm for botany from a young age, and especially for carnivorous plants in his later years. Soon after encountering the sundew *Drosera rotundifolia* on an English heath in 1860, Darwin wrote, "I care more about *Drosera* than the origin of all the species in the world."¹⁷ By September 1860 he was working with *Dionaea muscipula* as well. Darwin's rigorous experimentation with these enigmatic vegetal carnivores culminated in 1875 with the publication of *Insectivorous Plants*. Darwin conducted these experiments as part of an international network of naturalists who shared their findings with one another, together laying the framework for the study of plant carnivory as it exists today and cementing the notion of carnivorous plants in the scientific and public imagination.



⋮ Sundew (*Drosera rotundifolia*) trapping mechanism, pub....[?]

Yet Charles Darwin was neither the first nor the only member of his family to delight at the Venus flytrap and its murderous cohort. Indeed, his fascination with these plants developed over three generations of philosophical thought and scientific experimentation that included his grandfather and son. Indeed, the family's work with carnivorous plants reveals the enduring botanical legacy of Erasmus, Charles, and Francis Darwin.

The two lobes stand at rather less than a right angle to each other. Three minute pointed processes or filaments, placed triangularly, project from the upper surfaces of both; but I have seen two leaves with four filaments on each side, and another with only two. These filaments are remarkable from their extreme sensitiveness to a touch, as shown not by their own movement, but by that of the lobes. The margins of the leaf are prolonged into sharp rigid projections which I will call spikes, into each of which a bundle

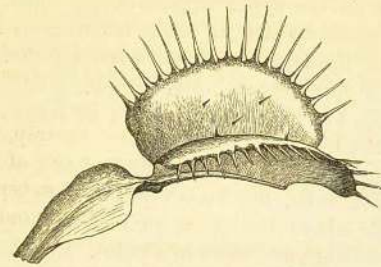
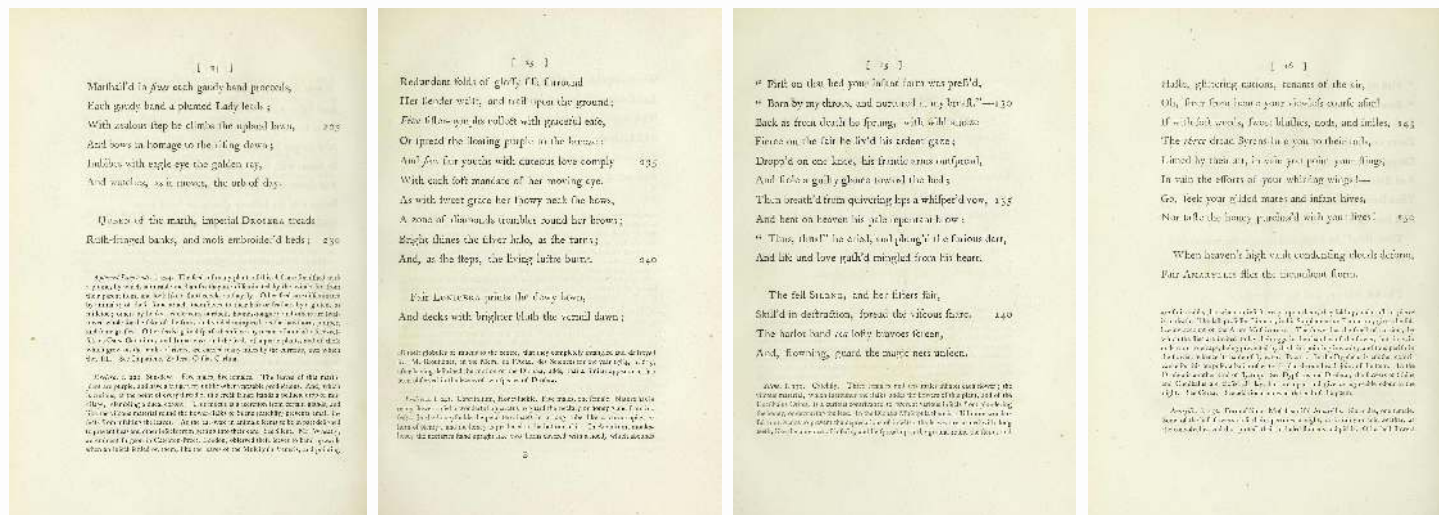


FIG. 12.
(*Dionaea muscipula*.)
Leaf viewed laterally in its expanded state.

of spiral vessels enters. The spikes stand in such a position that, when the lobes close, they inter-lock like the teeth of a rat-trap. The midrib of the leaf, on the lower side, is strongly developed and prominent.

The upper surface of the leaf is thickly covered, excepting towards the margins, with minute glands of a reddish or purplish colour, the rest of the leaf being green. There are no glands on the spikes, or on the foliaceous footstalk. The glands are formed of from

The latter half of Erasmus Darwin's two-part poem *The Botanic Garden* (1789) sought to display the Linnaean sexual system through poetic analogies of plant sexuality and human affairs, accompanied by his own botanical notes and observations. He carefully wove the mythological and physiological discussion through poetic prose and technical footnotes, appealing to a broad audience of general readers and botanical experts alike.



⌋ Erasmus Darwin's stanz... ⌋ ⌋ On Silene and Drosera... ⌋ ⌋ On Silene and Drosera... ⌋ ⌋ On Silene and Drosera,...

Erasmus considered the “viscous material” of the *Drosera* merely a mechanism to prevent “small insects from infesting the leaves,” “[a]s the ear-wax in animals seems to be in part designed to prevent fleas and other insects from getting into their ears.”¹⁸ He further conveyed in his extensive notes to the reader that “[i]n the *Dionaea Muscipula* there is a still more wonderful contrivance to prevent the depredations of insects: [...] so irritable, that when an insect creeps upon them, they fold up, and crush or pierce it to death.”¹⁹ Erasmus witnessed this “irritable” behavior of *Dionaea* firsthand in 1788 at Ashburn Hall, Derbyshire, subsequently receiving a colored illustration of the flytrap from writer and botanist Maria Elizabetha Jacson (1754–1842). Jacson would later bring attention to plant carnivory in her *Sketches of the Physiology of Vegetable Life* (1811). Most eighteenth-century illustrations of the Venus flytrap—including the one featured in Erasmus Darwin’s text, seen here—were simply modeled after James Roberts’ original plate. Comparing the two reveals near-mirror images.



⌋ ⌋



[785]

DIONEÆ MUSCIPULÆ. VENUS'S FLY-TRAP.

Class and Order.

DICANDEIA (velut POLYANDRIA) MONOCOTYLEDON.

Generic Character.

Cal. 5-phyllus. Petala 5. Caps. unilocularis polysperma.

Seu. obovata in receptaculo favosa partim immixta.

Specific Character and Synonyma.

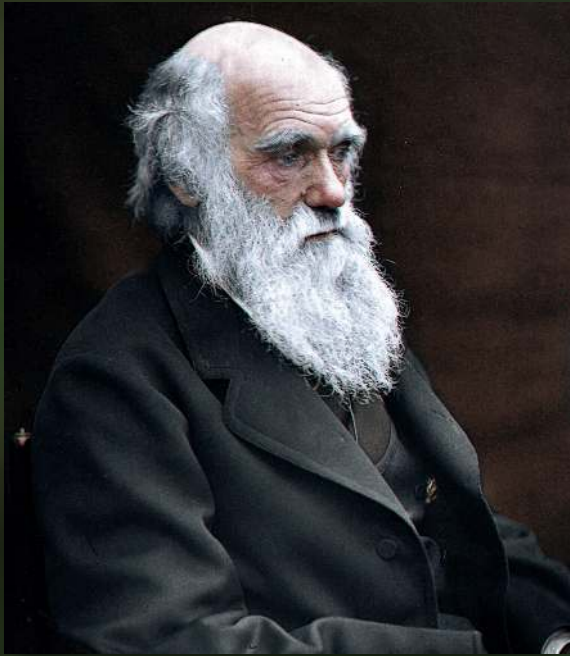
DIONEÆ Muscipulæ. Willd. Sp. Pl. 2. 574. Hort. Kew. 2. 63. Inq. Veget. 222. Rindl. 2. 281. Sturm Mfl. 1. 40. Mart. Mill. Dib. Ellis AG. Upl. Nov. 1. 98. t. 8. Ejin. Mong. 35. et descript. Venerat. Hort. Malabar. 29. Carriv's Linnæi, 1. 1.

DESC. Root perennial. Leaves all radical, supported on long winged fleshy and strongly veined footstalks, the wings region upwards and terminate a little below of the end of the footstalk, leaving a small portion of this next the leaf naked; the leaf itself consists of two reniform lobes jointed at the back so as to allow them to fold close together, fleshy, and when viewed through a lens, glandular; sometimes but not always of a reddish colour on the upper surface; the sides of both lobes but not the ends are furnished with a row of cartilaginous cilia, which stand nearly at right angles with the surface of the leaf, and lock into each other when the lobes close. In about the middle of each lobe are three very small spines or bristles. These small spines are numerous and figured by EXLII, and supposed by him to assist in detaining the entrapped animal; but that they are the only irritable points, and that any other part of the leaf may be touched with impunity, was discovered by our draughtsman, Mr. KENNEDY, several years ago, when taking a sketch of the plant flowering at Mr. LITTLE's, Mile-End, and has been since repeatedly confirmed. The same observation was made, without knowing it had been previously noticed, by our friend Mr. CHARLES KORN, in

⋮ Sydenham Edwards... ⋮ ⋮ Natural history... ⋮

Erasmus Darwin's conviction that such mechanisms—"curious contrivance[s]" to "prevent various insects from plundering the honey, or devouring the seed"—were a defense against insects is perplexing, placing so much emphasis on the damage a tiny fly could inflict on these plants. Was he perhaps allowing poetic metaphors to guide his understanding of biological phenomena? While painting a vivid picture of "The fell SILENE and her sisters fair," who "[s]kill'd in destruction, spread the viscous snare," he was inclined to present his anthropomorphized botanical actors as righteous wardens rather than scheming hunters.²⁰

Charles Darwin began pondering the lethal activities of carnivorous plants in 1860, and over the course of the decade sporadically worked with the [Droseraceae](#). Among those who facilitated his study of these plants were the American naturalist Mary Treat (1830–1923) and Joseph Dalton Hooker (1817–1911). Hooker, Darwin’s close friend and then director of Royal Botanic Gardens, Kew supplied him with ample living specimens. Armed with this network of correspondents and the global resources of Kew, Darwin was able to carry out detailed investigations of plant carnivory from his backyard greenhouse at Down House. Indeed, an important aspect of Darwin’s enduring impact on biology was his work that examined evolutionary adaptation through various botanical lenses, with the Venus flytrap and other carnivorous plants serving as prime examples. Francis Darwin sought to further develop the book’s findings by conducting his own [experiments](#) on plant carnivory and publishing a revised second edition in 1888.



CHARLES DARWIN.

Julius Jääskeläinen, 2019, Flickr via Wikimedia, CC BY 2.0.

DARWIN'S BOTANY

Charles Darwin (1809–1882) displayed great enthusiasm for botany, which is well-documented in his decades-long correspondences and myriad of writings defending the theory of evolution through the lens of the vegetal kingdom. But his fondness for carnivorous plants was particularly ardent.

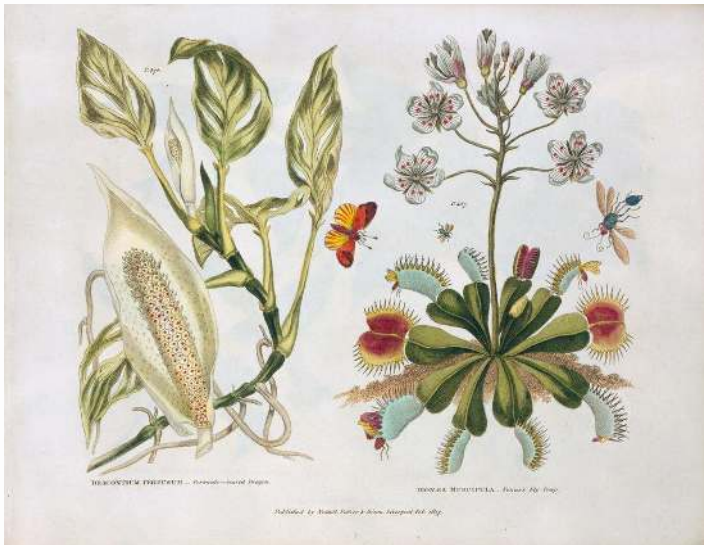


EARLY YEARS



“Vegetable Wickedness” on Display

The idea that a plant could consume animal prey has not been without controversy. French botanist Auguste Trécul (1818–1896) denounced the carnivorous character of *Drosera* in 1855, and as late as 1867 his colleague Pierre Duchartre (1811–1894) likewise declared the notion of carnivory unworthy of serious consideration.²¹ However, by 1875, the mountain of experimental evidence presented by Charles Darwin, alongside the work of Joseph Hooker, British physiologist John Burdon-Sanderson (1828–1935), Mary Treat, and others, finally convinced the broader scientific community that plants could indeed [attract](#), [capture](#), and digest [animal prey](#).



⋮ This dramatized incarnation of the Venus flytrap featur... [] ⋮ An unusually chaste... []

From that point on, carnivorous plants were less often portrayed as solitary botanical curiosities, but were instead grouped together in dynamic visual menageries. This trend was particularly popular in German encyclopedia entries, emerging parallel to the genesis of ecology as a field in Germany. Staged scenes from European greenhouses were used to present plant species that would never be found together in the wild as a single artificial category. The relationship between the vegetal predator and its insect prey was increasingly the focal point of such illustrations. Rather than serving as simply a feature of its native environment, the [Venus flytrap](#) became associated with the nutrient-poor soils that were thought to prompt its alternative feeding habits. Botanical illustrators increasingly sought to display carnivory as a product of its harsh environment, as ecology and evolutionary theory became ever more entwined.



⋮ Die Gartenlaube



⋮ Meyers b8 s0980a



⋮ The German botanist an...⋮

Around this time, the Venus flytrap was also taken on as a protagonist of new media of educational and artistic display. The Blaschka Glass Flowers, commissioned in 1886 by Professor George Lincoln Goodale (1839–1923), the first director of Harvard’s Botanical Museum, included perhaps the first life-sized model of *Dionaea muscipula* for teaching, complete with a [tiny glass fly](#) frozen forever on the precipice of doom. The fragile life-sized model further illustrated to students and the general public the evolutionary forces that shaped the plant, adapted to attract certain pollinating insects to its delicate [white flowers](#) (these visitors were graciously spared from consumption) and others to its [snap-trap leaves](#) (who were often not so lucky).²²



⋮ Glass model of *Dionaea muscipula* by Leopold and Rudol... []

Parallel to this shift in scientific depiction, an explosion of periodical literature featuring plant carnivory catapulted the Venus flytrap and its fellow vegetal carnivores into the public imagination. As Quaker author J.G. Hunt wrote of the sundew in his [Natural History Studies](#) (1882), “Surely here, if anywhere, is vegetable wickedness.” Accounts of man-eating plants regularly featured in Anglo-American periodical literature at the end of the nineteenth century, perpetuating far-fetched and often deeply racist stories from fictional explorers who had encountered the “Man-Eating Tree” of Madagascar or the “Vampire Vine” of Namibia—alternately revered and feared by similarly fabricated Indigenous tribes.²³



⋮ Sacrificed to a man-eating plant, American Weekly, ... []

Anglo-American depictions of man-eating plants were rife with racist and sexist connotations. A widely circulated fictional account blurring notions of human and vegetal monstrosity was published in J.W. Buel's *Sea and Land* (1887), chronicling the violent death of an Indigenous African woman by the men of a non-existent tribe, in a caricature of ritual human sacrifice. Other tales played into this trope by replacing the Indigenous woman with a typically white female victim, to be rescued from "savage" peoples by a white male protagonist. Carnivorous plants—especially imaginary ones—were often manipulated to reflect a variety of Anglo-American cultural contexts. In this case, artists and writers used botanical images of plant carnivory to visually articulate Anglo-American societal attitudes about categories of race, gender, and sexuality.

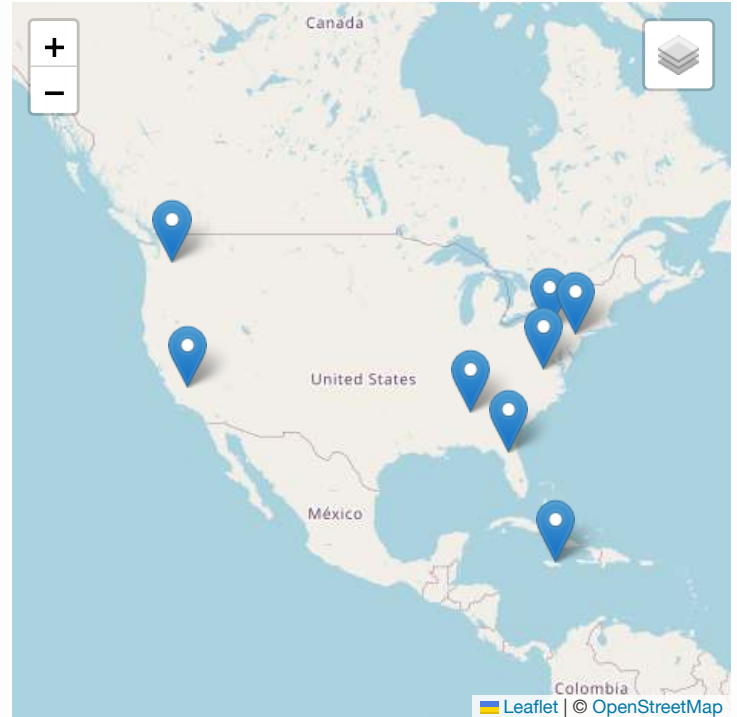


⋮ Sea and land : an illustrated history of the wonderful and... ⋮

Arthur Conan Doyle (1859–1930), author of Sherlock Holmes, helped jumpstart this craze in 1880 with “[The American’s Tale](#).” First published anonymously in the Christmas special of the *London Society* magazine, this short story centered on a man killed by a massive Venus flytrap in the Arizona wilderness. The legendary science fiction writer H.G. Wells also wrote of a botanist’s blood-sucking orchid in 1905, laying the foundations for alien man-eating plants featured in musical, film, and television adaptations of *Little Shop of Horrors* (1986) and *Day of the Triffids* (1962), which further popularized the Venus flytrap throughout the twentieth century.²⁴ The bloodthirsty antagonist of *Little Shop of Horrors* was modeled after the Venus flytrap, seen here exclaiming “Feed me!” to its reluctant caretaker.

Still Beguiling and Bewildering

As countless stunning cultivars are grown commercially to feed the global plant trade, wild populations of *Dionaea muscipula* have become increasingly threatened by habitat destruction, poaching, pollution, and anthropogenic climate change. Nearly half of all carnivorous plants fall under International Union for Conservation of Nature's Red List of risk categories, ranging from near threatened to critically endangered. Despite introduced populations having been established in the United States and Caribbean, *Dionaea* is currently listed as "vulnerable," with hefty fines and jail time threatening potential poachers.



⋮ Introduced populations of the Venus flytrap have been... 🗄

Today, the Venus flytrap remains on display in the living collections and special exhibitions of almost every major botanic garden in the world, attracting millions of visitors each year. The Venus flytrap has assumed many unorthodox roles in human affairs, becoming, sometimes simultaneously, a bawdy pun, poetic curiosity, threat to scientific order, wonder of natural selection, and an inspiration for exotic myths and monstrosities. As countless individuals have struggled to find a place for this curious little plant within their respective social and scientific contexts, *Dionaea muscipula* has become firmly established as an organism of beguiling and at times disconcerting cultural significance.



⋮ Venus flytrap (*Dionaea muscipula*). Plants With Bite...



⋮ Plants With Bite exhibit at the Royal Botanic Garden,...



⋮ Savage Gardens Exhibit at the U.S. Botanic...



References

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3. E. Charles Nelson, *Aphrodite's Mousetrap: A Biography of Venus's Flytrap with Facsimiles of an Original Pamphlet and the Manuscripts of John Ellis* (Aberystwyth, Wales: Boethius Press in association with Bentham-Moxon Trust and the Linnean Society, 1990), 26–27. ↩
4. Linnaeus' response is not known, and it seems likely that the letter from Collinson did not reach him. E. Charles Nelson, *Aphrodite's Mousetrap*, 22. ↩
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7. The summer of 2021 even witnessed the release of an empowering ballad by pop artist MARINA that subverts the plant's bawdy origins and pays homage to the creature features it inspired throughout the twentieth century, in a testament to the enduring legacy of the Venus flytrap in popular culture. MARINA - Venus Fly Trap (Official Music Video), 2021. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=F1JTInHGa90> ↩
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12. John Ellis, *Directions for Bringing over Seeds and Plants, from the East-Indies and Other Distant Countries, in a State of Vegetation: Together with a Catalogue of Such Foreign Plants. To Which Is Added, the Figure and Botanical Description of a New Sensitive Plant, Called Dionaea Muscipula: Or, Venus's Fly-Trap* (London: Printed and sold by L. Davis, 1770), 37. ↩
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