

# Venus flytrap is unique to area

By Odile Fredericks  
North Carolina Sea Grant

Every now and then you come across an oddball. An individualist who forces you to rethink how the world works and fires your imagination.

For at least the past 200 years, such a creature has lived quietly in the swamps of coastal North Carolina. Naturally occurring nowhere else on the planet, it lives within a 50-to-75-mile radius of Wilmington. The Venus' flytrap is the stuff that horror stories are made of -- a plant that bites back.

The inspiration of B-movies such as "Little Shop of Horrors," Venus' flytraps have long been thought to inhabit tropical jungles, a misconception fed by rumors centuries old.

"For a long time, early explorers came back with fantastic stories of man-/woman-eating plants," says Robert Gardner, a curator with the N. C. Botanical Garden in Chapel Hill. "They probably sowed the seeds, so to speak, of carnivorous plants being from exotic places. Some people even think it's from Venus -- that is a far-off place!"

The age-old fascination revolves around a plant that refuses to act like one. The Venus' flytrap does not need to capture insects because it photosynthesizes, but it snaps them anyway. In the nutrient-poor soils of its home in the bogs and savannas, bugs provide that little something extra.

"Anything it catches is used as a vitamin supplement," Gardner says. "It won't die without insects, it just prospers a little better."

Although other flesh-eating plants such as pitcher plants and butterworts have more passive or gradual methods of ensnaring their prey, Venus' flytraps act instantaneously, says Marj Boyer, a botanist with the N. C. Department of Agriculture, which monitors the plant.

"This is the most active of carnivorous plants," she says. "The Venus' flytrap is the only one you can real-

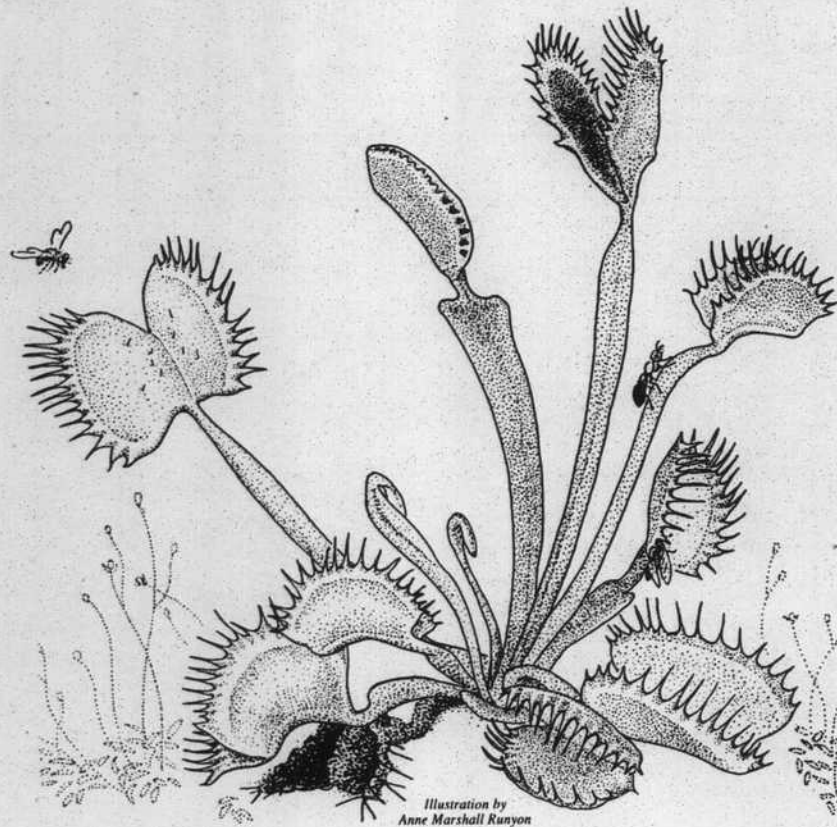


Illustration by  
Anne Marshall Runyon

ly see in action."

Charles Darwin himself thought them irresistible for their movement -- a plant that seemed to bridge the evolutionary gap. He performed experiments on them, declaring them one of the world's most wonderful plants, says Mike Dunn, coordinator of teacher education for the N. C. State Museum of Natural Sciences in Raleigh.

Discovered in North Carolina in 1760 by Gov. Arthur Dobbs, the Venus' flytrap has been researched more recently in Germany for possible cancer-fighting properties thought to lie in its digestive enzymes.

The plant captures its prey in a manner that recalls a medieval torture chamber. The traps are leaves that look like partially opened clam shells fringed by trigger hairs. Unsuspecting insects that wander inside -- perhaps enticed by nectar or the red color that some traps sport -- may stroke a hair and take no notice. Their second touch, how-

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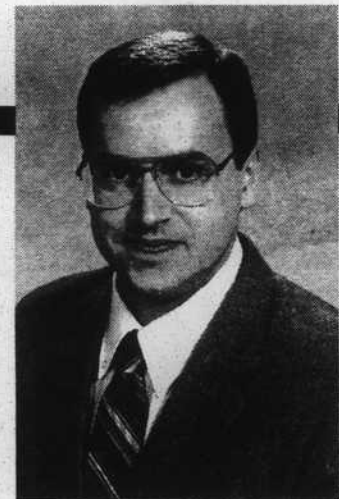
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