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## How to care for carnivorous plants

By SONOMA COUNTY MASTER GARDENERS  
FOR THE PRESS DEMOCRAT



This tropical pitcher plant (*Nepenthes edwardsiana*), thrives in the greenhouse at California Carnivores in Sebastopol. Chad Sumick/The Press Democrat.

**Question:** I was gifted a Venus fly trap plant and would like to know what other carnivorous plants are available. Also, do you have any tips on their care and maintenance?

**Answer:** Yes! Venus fly traps are a fun and fascinating plant to grow and care for. There are a few other carnivorous plants that can also be grown by home gardeners. With a bit of knowledge about their needs, they can be a fun addition to your plant collection.

Although there is one species of carnivorous plant native to California — the California pitcher plant (*Darlingtonia californica*) — a number of species grow in many areas around the world. In most cases, they are found in temperate, moist to humid environments and generally prefer damp to wet soils. The small Venus fly trap, for example, thrives in a very small native range in the Carolinas. A noteworthy giant of carnivorous plants is the *Nepenthes rajah*, a large, rare plant that grows in Borneo.

For the home enthusiast, a bit of homework should be done when deciding which carnivorous plants are available that you can care for. Special soil mixtures are available that mimic the low nutrient, bog-like texture that most of these plants prefer. In addition, specific fertilizers are made for these plants. So, keep this in mind if you use commercial fertilizers for your other houseplants.

Of course, one of the main reasons for keeping these plants is their ability to attract and consume small insects. Like other plants, photosynthesis is the primary way carnivorous plants grow. However, their ability to consume prey provides them with extra nutrients that are unavailable in their environment.

When grown indoors, a sunny windowsill with at least six hours of bright light is best. Since they derive minerals from the prey they consume, it's best to water carnivorous plants with filtered or distilled water, or rainwater.

Don't use tap water because it usually contains minerals and chemicals (like chlorine) that can harm the plant's sensitive roots and overall health. Also, avoid letting their soil become dry. Carnivorous plants thrive best with consistently moist, but not soggy, soil.

Carnivorous plants use various strategies for trapping prey.

The Venus fly trap encloses a pair of its lobes around its prey when an insect triggers sensitive hairs inside the plant. Pitcher plants use a different strategy. They have a tall, slender shape that insects cannot usually escape from once they slide down the walls of the plant. Some pitcher plants employ unique strategies to lure prey, such as emitting scents attractive to certain insects.

Other plants may use feather-like appendages or sticky substances to trap prey. In our mild Sonoma County climate, many types of carnivorous plants can be grown outdoors. For obvious reasons, having live flies and other insects loose in your home isn't ideal! Although some enthusiasts feed them dried mealworms or other types of larvae, Venus's fly traps rely on their sensitive lobe hairs to detect prey movement.

In fact, after a few unsuccessful attempts at closing its lobes around prey, the plant may stop closing for a time or die back.

This prevents the plant from wasting energy on debris, rain drops or other non-food items that might accidentally fall into its trap. Beetles, ants and other insects might also visit these plants and become prey.

The world of carnivorous plants is large and fascinating. The above information is only a brief introduction. Whether you're a beginner to carnivorous plants or want to grow your collection, consult a reputable nursery for tips and cultivars best suited to your skill level.

The Sonoma County-based California Carnivores no longer has a nursery to visit but it continues to sell carnivorous plants through its website at <https://californiacarnivores.com>

Additional reading

UCANR Carnivorous Plants: <https://tinyurl.com/ycksv2hs>

UCANR Venus Fly Traps: <https://tinyurl.com/>

*Contributors to this week's column were Robert Williams and Lisa Howard. The UC Master Gardener Program of Sonoma County [sonomamg.ucanr.edu/](http://sonomamg.ucanr.edu/) provides environmentally sustainable, science-based horticultural information to Sonoma County home gardeners. Send your gardening questions to [scmgpd@gmail.com](mailto:scmgpd@gmail.com). You will receive answers to your questions either in this newspaper or from our Information Desk. You can contact the Information Desk directly at 707-565-2608 or [mgsonoma@ucanr.edu](mailto:mgsonoma@ucanr.edu).*