Carnivorous Plants. By Dan Torre. 2019. Reaktion Books. (ISBN 9781789140521). 240 pp. Hardcover, $20.53.

Carnivorous plants are not the gorgeous flowers typically seen in magazines and calendars or on Facebook, but they certainly have a kind of allure that roses, orchids, and lilies can match. For many people, the idea of meat-eating plants doesn’t fit with the usual concept of plants making their own food, and historically this idea was even difficult for scientists. This book includes a detailed story of carnivorous plants, including their evolution, growth patterns, ways of obtaining nourishment, and comparisons to non-carnivorous plants. There are over 700 species of carnivorous plants – plants with leaves that attract and consume insects and other small invertebrates. They are found throughout the Earth in numerous habitats, especially those that lack the kinds of nutrients that can be supplied by animals. Most plants absorb nutrients from the soil, many of which originate from decayed animals and their excrement, but only plants that actually capture their animal food are considered carnivorous. Although carnivorous plants can survive on their own, they will grow better if they get their meat. Some are carnivorous only part of their lives and others are even omnivorous, also consuming plant material.

Some of these captivating plants use snapping traps to capture their meals, while some manufacture sticky materials to catch their prey. A variety of additional adaptations in these plants ensure successful meal preparation. Many of these plants also have relationships with other organisms (bacteria, protozoa, and even insects and mammals) to assist them with their food gathering. Author Dan Torre includes thorough descriptions of the natural history of many carnivorous plants, including the more well-known Venus flytrap, pitcher plant, sundew, and bladderwort as well as the lesser-known waterwheel plant, rainbow plant, corkscrew plant, and cobra plant.

One memorable chapter, “Attack of the Killer Plants,” shows that carnivorous plants are good subjects for horror stories, from Arthur Conan Doyle’s “The American’s Tale” to the 1960 film “The Little Shop of Horrors.” In addition to their literary appearances, these plants are also an important theme in visual art. Contemporary artist Madeline von Foerster describes her stunning paintings as “living still-lifes.” Several of her exquisite images adorn the pages of this book. Other forms of carnivorous plant art include metal and glass sculptures, postage stamps, coins, a Malaysian fountain, and Nike’s “Kyrie 1 Flytrap” basketball shoes. Here are a few other thought-provoking items to look for while reading this book:

- the botanical garden display that duped visitors with giant carnivorous plants
- the extensive discussion of how the Venus flytrap functions
- the criminologist who wrote that carnivorous plants are likely the evolutionary source of human evil
- the remarkable relationship between a pitcher plant and a bat in Borneo
- the way bush fires contribute to the growth of carnivorous plants
- the surprising process by which Roridula gets its nourishment
- the description of a “man-eating plant,” discovered by German explorer Carl Liche
- the long pathway to the discovery that some plants are carnivorous
- how and why sundews were once used as love charms
- the use of carnivorous plants as medicines for animals and humans
- the ways that the golden ant assists the pitcher plant, Nepenthes bicalcarata
- humorous newspaper accounts of topics such as (1) the intelligence of carnivorous plants, with the claim that Martian plants are more intelligent than Earth plants; (2) the pitcher plant devouring a bat, and (3) carnivorous plants dying of indigestion

For readers who might like to try cultivating these extraordinary plants, there is information on proper care, including the right soil, water, and light conditions, and possible difficulties that might be encountered. The conservation of these delightful plants is important, and in some places it is illegal to remove carnivorous plants from their natural environment. Packed with fascinating information, this is a deeply researched, wonderfully written, and lavishly illustrated book.
illustrated book that should appeal to book lovers interested in botany, especially that of the more unusual plants. It is appropriate for high school, college, and adult readers. In addition to an index, the book includes a time line, a detailed list of citations, a bibliography, and a list of associations and websites.

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