

Carnivorous Plants



By Marketa Janouchova

Believe it or not, some plants eat animals. They are called carnivorous plants. They are also known as insectivorous as they can barely eat any animal larger than an insect (at least in our mild climate). But they are really "insect-voracious". A Great Sundew (*Drosera anglica*) can catch several hundred insects a year! The Pitcher Plants, which grow mainly in Southeast Asia, can trap not just small insects but also cockroaches, centipedes and scorpions. The digestive acid in them is so powerful, that a midge will disappear entirely within hours! The Rajah Pitcher Plant (*Nepenthes rajah*), the biggest of all Pitcher Plants, is said to be able to eat mice!



Photograph courtesy of Rort Jong

A drowned lizard was found in this newly-opened pitcher plant (having being pulled out of the digestive area for the picture).

Can insectivorous plants become vegetarian?

Everyone who had grown these plants at home knows that there is no need to feed them with insects. Once they are grown in soil with enough nutrients, the plants have no need to hunt for insects!



Midge Catchers!

These plants will digest any animal that they can trap, usually insects and bugs. One such insect is the midge. If you've ever been out in the garden on a warm humid evening, it's quite likely you've been bitten by one. These tiny insects are very annoying and love the warm damp conditions where carnivorous plants live. Though the midges have few enemies, these type of plants are certainly one of them!



What do they gain from eating insects?

Insectivorous plants usually grow in places which lack nutrients in the soil, like bogs and peat, and have their "feet" in water most of the time. As they cannot get nitrogen from the soil, which they need for their growth, they get it instead by trapping insects and using digestive juices to extract nitrogen from the proteins in them.

How do they trap them ...

...if they cannot jump and leap on their prey like tigers? They just have to wait patiently until the insects come along. The animals are lured to the plants and once the animals settle on them they become trapped. Different species use different tricks and have different traps to catch them (see page 12).

Are there any in Ireland?

Insectivorous plants occur in many countries around the world, such as America, South Asia, Australia, New Zealand and Madagascar. They also occur in Ireland. We have 12 insectivorous species (if we count the hybrids - plants produced from two different species)!



Round-leaved Sundew (*Drosera rotundifolia*) is commonly found in boggy areas around Ireland.

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