

THE HELL'S HALF-ACRE HERALD

Volume I, Issue I

<http://txtriffidranch.livejournal.com>

October 2007

In this issue:

- How to feed a carnivorous plant
- Carnivorous plant resources
- Dragonfruit
- The first rule of garden club is you do not talk about garden club

About the Texas Triffid Ranch

Part online resource, part experiment in scientific gonzo journalism, part excuse to chronicle interesting experiments on the porch, the Texas Triffid Ranch and its residents (the narrator Paul Riddell, his wife the Czarina, two cats, the World's Meanest Box Turtle, and a greenhouse full of carnivorous plants) attempt to demonstrate that urban gardening can be a lot more than a couple of neglected terra cotta pots on the back porch. At least, that's the idea.

About the Hell's Half-Acre Herald

A continuation of a long-dead literary zine, the *Herald* is an attempt at a regular publication for the Deep Ellum Sellum, held on the second Saturday of every month in the Deep Ellum area of Dallas. Copyright 2007 by Paul Riddell; feel free to ask about reproduction or distribution of issues. And why are you still reading this? Are you *that* bored?

“Answers to questions you didn’t want answered”

By Paul Riddell

Without fail, whenever I volunteer that I raise carnivorous plants, I get one of two responses, usually one right after the other. The first is, *always*, "Oh, so have you seen *Little Shop of Horrors?*", and I weep that nobody even reads John Wyndham's *The Day of the Triffids* any more. The second, without fail, when I mention that you generally don't have to feed carnivores if kept correctly, is "Wow! I need one of those! They'll be great for dealing with the bugs in my house!" And that's when I killed them, Your Honor.

The reality of keeping carnivorous plants is that they're not hardened killers of arthropod prey, waiting hungrily for their next victim. Well, they *do*, but they don't have the energy to do so more than passively. While they subsist on captured flies, fungus gnats, and anything else they can subdue, carnivorous plants will no more wipe out the wasps attracted to your spilled rum and Coke or the roaches in your sink than they will the relatives who swore they'd call before they came to visit. If they did, then they'd be a lot more popular. Carnivores use all sorts of tricks and lures to attract prey, but they still won't compensate for your filthy living habits.

That said, I'm still nagged and *nuhdzed* by cohorts and acquaintances about using carnivores for pest control, and I realized that I *do* have one surefire way to use carnivores to process at

least one household pest. Right now, thanks to the inordinate amounts of rain received in the Dallas area, the area is overrun with representatives of the American cockroach, *Periplaneta americana*. Contrary to popular presentations of their being fond of linedancing while lassoing runaway cats, the American cockroach, or "palmetto bug" as they're referred to in these parts, is a critter with precious little to recommend them to anyone but entomologists. The good news about a beast large enough to bear hood ornaments and TireFlies is that they only stay indoors if the conditions are suitably foul for human habitation: in most houses, such as ours, they sneak indoors along pipes and vents, look around for a while in vain for food, and promptly keel over due to dehydration from the indoor air conditioning. They may keel over, but they aren't necessarily dead: try to pick up one that looks dead, and it'll usually decide then to crawl up your arm in an effort to convince you that you need to be in the next time zone. That tactic works remarkably well.

Anyway, the Czarina understandably loathes *P. americana* from her experiences from living next to a Thai restaurant during her first marriage. This means that while she normally has no fear of man, beast, or god, I'm the one she wakes up in the middle of the night to take care of the monster bug. Personally, I can't blame her, and I'm glad she settles for waking me instead of taking off and nuking the entire site from orbit. These days,

her understandable hate and my hobby combine, and it works out well for everyone but the roaches.

Now, to imitate my results, you'll need a few things. The first is a carnivorous plant big enough to deal with our icky bugs. This is an Asian pitcher plant, species *Nepenthes alata*, native to the Phillipines. Let's call him "Bub".



Being a very fast-growing *Nepenthes*, "Bub" has a good half-dozen pitchers already established, with more on the way. *Nepenthes* plants produce two types of traps: lower traps that remain along the ground, and upper traps for when the plant starts to vine and twine up trees and other obstacles. Many species have upper traps so different from lower traps that they'd be mistaken for separate species were they discovered separately. Below is a pristine freshly opened lower trap, noting the distinctive color that marks *N. alata* as one of my favorites.



Now, we need a bug, and nature always provides. Let's call him "archy".



Since we don't want to be overly cruel, and since you don't want the little darling scuttling up your arm, dispatch "archy" with whatever non-chemical means are at your disposal.



"Anyone else have any questions about the way things are going to run around here from now on?"

Now that you've subdued "archy", it's now a matter of getting "archy" to "Bub". Oh, you can use your fingers, but considering the various diseases and parasites carried by cockroaches, don't you want to use tools?



And there he goes...



If in case "archy" is a bit too large, don't be afraid to use appropriate tools for the job. "Power tools...to make life easy..."



Chainsaws are for wimps.



Be warned that it's very easy to overfeed carnivorous plants, especially when dealing with prey items with Klendathu passports. This trap demonstrates a perfect case of *Nepenthes* indigestion, seeing as how "archy" was joined by his buddies "N'Grath" and "Truzenzuzex" before the trap had a chance to digest the first meal.



If you get more bugs than your pitcher plant can handle, don't be afraid to use modern food storage techniques to save a meal for later. Here's "Samsa" being prepped for next week's dinner event.



Alternately, if you're feeling particularly daring, feel free to keep your prey animals free-range. Just make sure to use appropriate methods to warn friends and family members as to your intent. Here's "Barlennan" wearing an appropriate evening ensemble.



And see the benefits of your regular feeding? Not only is "Bub" responding so well that he's producing new traps, but he's even producing new sprouts from his roots, complete with brand new mosquito-sized traps.



Finally, remember that the secret of effective use of carnivorous plants for pest control lies with the pest, not the plant. With the right tools, *any* pest may become plant food. For instance, this pest also woke me up at three in the morning, intent upon nothing but eating, defecating, and shedding all over the place. Let's call it "Mehitabel".



Hmmmm. I think I'm going to need more freezer bags.

NEXT MONTH:

- Habanero pepper bonsai
- Wollemi pines
- Triggerplants

Things to Do in Dallas When You're Dead

With most horticultural beginners, Dallas looks particularly desolate. The city isn't far enough east for piney woods, it isn't far enough west for full desert, and it's not far enough north for apple trees or far enough south for mangrove flats. This means that anyone wanting to experiment has to be innovative, especially with what we're told are acceptable and unacceptable plants. As the old saying goes, the gardening books can't be trusted because the plants don't read. (Oh, sure, the USDA guides say Dallas is part of Zone 9, but that almost literally depends upon which direction the wind is blowing. The individual who invented the term "microclimate" was obviously a Dallas native.)

For those seeking alternatives to Home Depot and Lowe's potted plants, the Dallas area has plenty of alternatives. Of particular note:

The Dallas Organic Garden Club

(www.dogc.org) not only welcomes newcomers to Dallas and to gardening, but regularly shares cuttings and excess plants from members' collections. The club meets on the fourth Thursday of every month but November at Fretz Park (Beltline and Hillcrest), and features regular speakers and other guests.

Redenta's (www.redentas.com) and **North Haven Gardens** (www.nhg.com) both support local specialist groups, and they both carry an exceptional selection of native and exotic trees and other plants. Both venues also carry an extensive line of organic gardening supplements and tools: go to Redenta's for the potting soil and the *hori-hori* knives, go to North Haven for the tulip bulbs.

Gunter's (www.gunters.com) is for those seeking something different, as it carries one of the widest retail selections of captive-propagated orchids in North Texas. Make a point of viewing the main display shed to view the selection of orchids and air plants.

Oh, and the **Dallas Farmers Market** (www.dallasfarmersmarket.org) jettisoned its previous reputation to become an important venue for locally-grown herbs, fruit, vegetables, and live plants. Look for the "GO TEXAN" shed for local growers and in-season specials.

Carnivorous Plant Resources

Contrary to popular perception, carnivorous plants are very easy to raise in captivity, so long as they get the proper conditions for survival and growth. All carnivores live in nitrogen- and potassium-depleted environments (bogs, fens, and the crooks of trees, among others), and they catch insects and other animals to collect those elements, not to be perverse. The vast, vast majority of carnivores live and thrive in moist, boggy, extremely acid venues, such as sphagnum moss bogs, and will not survive in other conditions. If you're planning to use Venus flytraps as a border for your rose bushes, save your time and money and plant silk ficuses instead. They'll live longer.

Most of the commercially available varieties of carnivorous plant share three major needs: very acid soil, very soft water, and lots of light. Don't try to raise most carnivores indoors unless they live in a window receiving a minimum of eight to ten hours of sun or they receive a comparable amount of artificial light. While most live in very humid environments (Venus flytraps are originally from North Carolina, and the area around Tallahassee, Florida is one of the richest carnivorous plant habitats on the planet), they can generally adapt to drier conditions so long as their soil remains moist at all times. This also means watering with rain water or distilled water: Dallas municipal water is so mineral-laden that it's best described as "crunchy", and using Dallas tap water to water your pitcher plants can kill them in a matter of hours. Contrary to popular belief, boiling tap water won't remove dissolved minerals, and neither will most home water filters and purifiers. If you have to ask, don't use it.

As far as the types of carnivore to grow, that honestly depends upon your interests, your determination, and your available room. Some varieties, such as the Australian lance-leafed sundew (*Drosera adelae*) can be kept in a terrarium lit with a single compact fluorescent light, but some of the big *Nepenthes* pitcher plants from Borneo may outgrow a ten-meter greenhouse. For informed purchases, as well as for more information, consider the following:

The **International Carnivorous Plant Society** (www.carnivorousplants.org) specializes in advancing new knowledge about carnivores and related plants. The quarterly *Carnivorous Plant Newsletter* keeps up with new discoveries, new cultivars of known plants, and habitat and propagation information. The ICPS also runs a seed bank, allowing members to contribute fresh seed or to buy packets of previously donated seed in order to relieve stress on wild populations.

Timber Press (www.timberpress.com) publishes several of the best books on carnivorous plants currently available, as well as some of the most respected books on orchids, mosses, acid-loving fruit bushes, and other plants generally found in carnivore habitats.

When searching for books on carnivores, particularly ones long out-of-print, a quick letter to **Mark Ziesing Booksellers** (www.ziesingbooks.com) usually gets the job done. If Mark can't find it, it's usually impossible to find at any price. Mark is also an excellent source for other books, too, so feel free to fill your library with his help.

The rules of garden club

(with severe apologies to Chuck Pahlaniuk)

First rule: You do not talk about garden club.

Second rule: You **DO NOT** talk about garden club.

Third rule: If someone says "it's too hot" or "I wanna watch TV," the garden is over.

Fourth rule: Only one guy to a garden.

Fifth rule: One garden at a time.

Sixth rule: No fertilizers, no hydroponics.

Seventh rule: Gardens will go on as long as they have to.

And the eighth and final rule: If this is your first night at garden club, you *have* to weed.

THE TEXAS TRIFFID RANCH

Paul Riddell
5930-E Royal Lane
#140
Dallas, Texas 75230 USA
<http://txtriffidranch.livejournal.com>

*And who says that urban
horticulture has to be boring?*

Coming of the Dragonfruit

You ever have that experience with horticultural experiments that threaten to get out of control? For instance, when all you wanted to do was develop mutant potatoes that would just walk into the pot and ended up creating monstrous stinging carnivorous plants that communicate with each other and wait patiently for human prey? Yeah, I think I did the same thing this last week, thanks to my first serious experience with dragonfruit.

For various obscure reasons, although the fruit of the genus *Hylocereus* is understandably popular throughout the rest of the world, it really hasn't taken off in the US until recently, and I was fascinated with it from the start. Problem was, I kept forgetting to research it further, and told myself "Well, the next time it shows up in the grocery store, I'm going to grab a few seeds and see what kind of plant the fruit came from." Thankfully for me, dragonfruit comes in a wide array of cultivars (and how could you *not* spend a hot summer evening chowing down on some

"David Bowie"?), so I ended up gathering seeds from a particularly brilliantly colored and subtly flavored variety. A few days soaking in water to clear any germination inhibitors from the seeds, and then into the greenhouse in a standard potting mix. *Then* I bothered to do my research, just after seeing the seedlings start to emerge this morning.

You'd think I'd learn to do the research first, and *then* start growing plants, but there's something so appealing about throwing seeds into potting medium and seeing what comes up. Discovering that *Hylocereus* is a climbing cactus was much like discovering exactly how large vanilla orchids can get: the first thought that came to mind was "What am I getting myself into?" Inability to handle temperatures below 10 degrees C, long vining stems, lots of compost in the soil...oh, yes, I'm going to need a much larger greenhouse if I'm going to make this work.