HOW VENUS’ FLYTRAPS CATCH SPIDERS AND ANTS

By Stephen E. Williams

(Continued from September)

How does a trap move? Most authors, myself included, have preferred to think of this very rapid movement as being due to a rapid loss of water from various cells in the trap. Ashida proposed a model of trap movement based on this idea which is very attractive. He proposed that a loss of water from the cells on the inner surface of the leaf would allow cells on the outer surface of the leaf to expand and the lobes would then curve inward. Unfortunately there is no evidence that his ideas are correct and evidence from experiments by Brown [Table II] indicate that this is not likely to be the case. Although it is based on an inadequate number of samples and the methods are a bit crude, Brown’s experiments indicate that closure results from a very rapid growth of the cells on the outer surface of the trap. A sudden release of a factor that causes the cell walls of this surface to loosen is not out of the question, while a reopening process due to growth is quite reasonable. Our laboratory is presently working on this problem—the answer to which may have importance to understanding the nature of plant growth in general. Presently, however, the best answer to the question of how a Dionaea trap moves is: “It is not known”.

We are left with a picture of an ant or spider walking inadvertently into a trap, tripping two hairs at an interval of a few seconds and finding itself trapped in a pocket with the triggerhairs. It stimulates these as it struggles and thereby tightens the trap around itself and initiates the secretion of digestive fluid which kills it. As the digestive fluids decompose the prey, salts and amino acids are released. These stimulate the trap to remain closed and perhaps also stimulate more secretion. When no more breakdown products exist to stimulate trap closure it reopens. When all of these actions are put together we see behavior which is as complex as that of some primitive animals. I cast my vote with Darwin, Dionaea is “the most wonderful plant in the world.”

TABLE II. PERCENT INCREASE IN LENGTH OF ABAXIAL AND ADAXIAL SIDES OF DIONAEA TRAP LOBES DURING CLOSURE AND RECOVERY Versus THE INCREASE IN LENGTH OF UNSTIMULATED CONTROLS. a

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>ABAXIAL</th>
<th>ADAXIAL</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>CLOSING</td>
<td>8.4 (5)</td>
<td>-1.0 (2)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>RECOVERY</td>
<td>0.8 (3)</td>
<td>9.4 (2)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>GROWTH OF CONTROL DURING 1/8 DAY</td>
<td>0.5 (3)</td>
<td></td>
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b The number of replications is given in parenthesis.

References: Except for the original data presented in Table I the author and others have reviewed these subjects in the following articles, each of which gives complete references.


Lichtner, F.T. and Williams, S.E., 1977. Prey capture and factors controlling (Please see WILLIAMS p. 100)

The 20 minute chromosomes of this CP species have terminal segments of heterochromatin which the author shows replicate late in the cell cycle.


This paper contains Dodge's formal description of W. haynei which he feels best fits the southern populations inhabiting Sarracenia purpurea ssp. venosa pitchers, while the older W. smithii are found in populations of the northern ssp. purpurea. Previously, it was thought there was one species, W. smithii, involved. This older reference is of some interest because it eluded us so long even though we knew generally of the concept; now we have the exact reference. (See also Castanea 37:146-147, 1972; Castanea 44:47-59, 1979.)


Nepenthes pitcher content is influenced by the structure of the pitcher and life history of the insect species.


Protein challenge studies of leaf segments of P. ionantha indicate that rapid movement of chloride ion from reservoir to endodermal to head cells in secretory glands causes a flush of water movement which washes stored enzymes out on to the leaf surface. (DES)


Most eggs of this mosquito were laid in new pitchers of Sarracenia purpurea and chemical stimuli specific to new pitchers played a dominant role in selectivity. The distribution pattern of eggs suggested that a female lays eggs neither at random nor in a large batch but in small numbers. The ecology and evolution of mosquitoes breeding in small-container habitats was discussed.

GULF COAST - continued from p. 95 therefore the var. 'maxima' label should also be discouraged.

Also in the Gulf area are found a variety of light to heavily veined specimens with a great degree of variability in coloration. The once thought to be nearly extinct form with red tube and green lid may be locally common in some locations in the Gulf. Finally, a copper-lid form with large wavy lid is found in only a few locations around and near Pensacola and appears to be the rarest of the S. flava forms in the Gulf area based on my explorations.


We are continuing to feature Dionaea. The Venus’ flytrap captures insects in its bear-
trap-shaped leaves. Insects are reported to be attracted to glands in the region around
the edge of the inner part of the leaf. If they chance to touch one of the three
trigger hairs on either lobe of the trap only once during their movements, there is
no response, but if the insect should be so unfortunate as to brush against the
same hair or any of the other hairs a second time the trap snaps shut, incarcerating
him. Note that the inner surface of the trap is convex and the outer surface is
concave when the trap is open. Closure occurs when the lobes of the trap flip shut
so that this situation is reversed. After closure the inner surface is concave and the
outer surface is convex. Thus, the movement occurs in the lobes and not at a “hinge”
between them as is sometimes erroneously stated. See continuation of Stephen Williams’
article on page 91. Photo and caption by S. Williams.

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Where the podium and the lever meet is a lighter colored flexible area where the hair can be bent. It is in this area that the sensory cells have recently been demonstrated to be located by R.M. Benolken and S.L. Jacobson. These initiate the electric current that triggers the impulses which sweep over the surface of the whole trap. The smaller red knobs are digestive glands which are thought to secrete the enzymes that digest the insect.

Photo by Stephen Williams