

A CARNIVOROUS PLANT LOVER REMEMBERED

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In 1976 my father, Jeff Del Col, published an article in the *Carnivorous Plant Newsletter* 6(1):9, suggesting the possibility of feeding carnivorous plants on freeze-dried tropical fish food “if living insects are undesirable in the home.” “I must emphasize that this is only a suggestion,” he wrote. “I have done no experiments, although I plan to this summer using *D. rotundifolia*.”

I was a year old at the time and don't remember the experiments. Nor do I know whether my father — who died unexpectedly this past March at age 68 — was the first person to come up with the idea; Google suggests that it's now common practice. But I do know this incident was typical both of his love for carnivorous plants and of his curiosity about the world in general.

When Dad wrote his article, our family was living in a trailer near West Virginia University, where he was working toward his Doctorate of Education in Literature and Technology. Somehow he had managed to find space for his plants and as much of their paraphernalia as he could get away with (I suspect it was Mom who decided that living insects were “undesirable in the home”). Later we moved 30 miles south to the small town of Philippi, where he taught English at Alderson-Broaddus College (now Alderson Broaddus University) for over 35 years. The move gave him more room to grow plants both indoors and outdoors, and he was surprised to find that *Nepenthes* would thrive outside in West Virginia's relatively mild climate.

At school I learned to draw gardens with rows of lollipop-stick flowers, but I knew reality was stranger and more wonderful: the flytraps with their pink eyelashes, the jeweled pincushions of the sundews, the tiny lakes hidden in the pitcher plants. When I became aware of how these plants nourished themselves, I felt the same mixture of fear and awe as when I learned that my grandfather had observed the atomic bomb tests at Bikini Atoll. Sometimes when no one was watching, I would brush the marginal teeth of a flytrap with one finger, then snatch my hand away. (I didn't know that the actual trigger hairs were on the leaf surface.)

Carnivorous plants weren't the only ones Dad grew, but all the plants he chose reflected his fascination with (to use a phrase by Gerard Manley Hopkins, one of the many poets he loved) “all things counter, original, spare, strange.” His other favored families were cacti and orchids. Even when he took up rose gardening in the 1990s, he focused on nearly forgotten antique varieties: I learned to drive by accompanying him on his “rose-rustling” trips to tiny mountain graveyards. When not



tending his own plants, he could often be found in the woods, carrying a field guide to lichen, fungi, or slime molds. A year before his death, he announced with great triumph when he finally found bird's-nest fungus in the wild.

I moved to London after my marriage in 2000, but plants continued to provide a bond between Dad and me. Often I would put a picture on Facebook of something I had seen growing in the wild or at Kew Gardens, and he would come back within the hour with a species identification and some information about its life history. I eventually went to work for a bat conservation charity, so we both had special reason to be delighted when scientists discovered that Hardwicke's woolly bat had a mutualistic relationship with *Nepenthes hemsleyana*, fertilizing the plant with its droppings in exchange for shelter.

In the last years of his life, my father lamented that he didn't have a Wardian case, which would have allowed him to grow *Nepenthes* even more successfully. It must have been one of the few pieces of equipment he didn't possess; his Hopkinsian fascination with the world extended to "all trades, their gear and tackle and trim." After he died, it took my mother several weeks to go through his plants and tools. Most of his indoor plants went to the biology department's greenhouse at Alderson Broaddus, where students will look after them, as did most of his equipment and his horticultural library. I've kept two plant books he was especially fond of: Carnivorous Plants by Adrian Slack, and Francis Ernest Lloyd's 1942 classic of the same name.

Dad did differ from Hopkins (a sincere but insecure Jesuit) in one respect. In a sermon from 1880, Hopkins told his congregation that humanity's mission was to "spread over the earth ... outside Paradise full of thorns and thistles, and reclaim it piece by piece to the condition of Paradise itself." Dad knew that the "thorns and thistles" were *part* of Paradise, and that we reclaimed them simply by appreciating them. If there is a garden in the next life, I know he's searching its neglected corners and forgotten bogs for *Pinguicula* and *Aldrovanda vesiculosa*. Even if there isn't, those whose lives he touched will honor him by doing the same on earth.



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