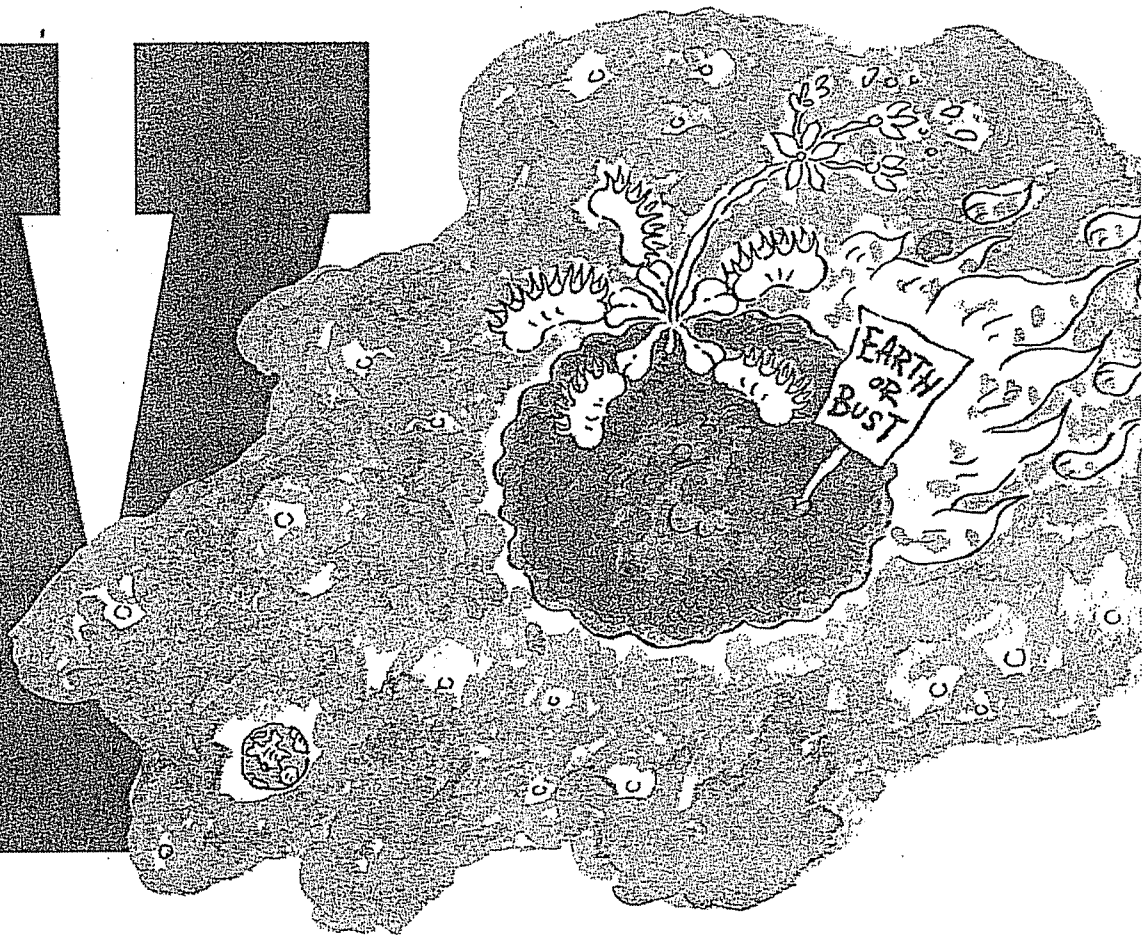


VIV



VILE VEGETATION

There's nothing like a beautiful bouquet of flowers to make someone feel special. And while a dozen long-stemmed roses are awfully nice, if you really want to get someone's attention, how about sending them a nice bug-eating plant? Feeling even more devilish? How about one that reeks of rotting flesh?

I SMELL SWEET. I EAT MEAT.

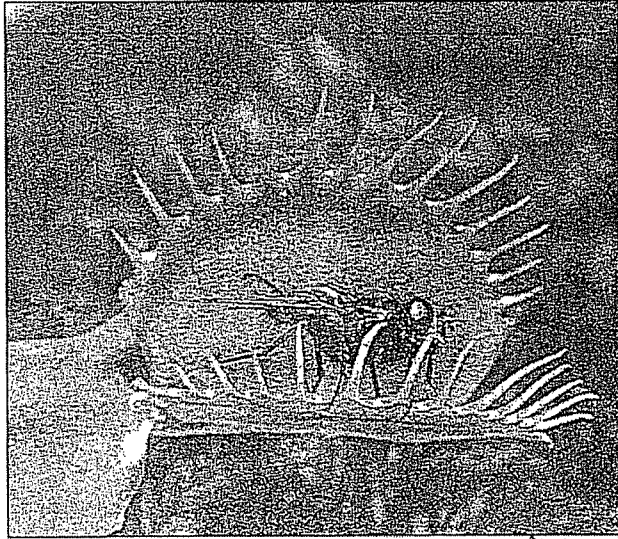
North Carolina legend has it that the first VENUS FLYTRAPS came from outer space aboard meteors hurtling toward earth. After all, they are native to only one spot—the sandy, boggy soil of North and South Carolina that

happens to surround an ancient meteor crater.

Venus flytraps are CARNIVOROUS (*carniv-ab-rus*) plants—plants that eat flesh. Venus flytraps love to dine on crawling critters such as ants, spiders, and other meaty bugs. Flies, which are like a pint of chocolate ice cream to a flytrap, are harder to come by. Still, a flytrap can always hope. . . .

At the tip of each flytrap leaf is—you guessed it—a trap. The trap is divided in half and looks kind of like a gaping jaw. The two halves are hinged like a door and are edged with stiff, bristly hairs. Each half of the trap also has three “trigger” hairs that, when touched, make the two halves of the trap swing shut.

Let's say some innocent little ant goes out for a sunset stroll across an open flytrap leaf. It accidentally brushes against the trigger hairs and, faster than you can say “breakfast on a branch,” the leaf snaps shut. The ant is now



lives in America's slimiest bogs and muckiest marshes. (Carnivorous plants developed the ability to eat bugs because the soil in the places they live has so few nutrients in it.) Pitcher plants devour bugs. Each of its leaves is shaped like a jug, with a slippery rim lined with stiff hairs that point downward into the leaf. When an insect lands on the inviting, but slippery, edge of the leaf, it slips downward. When it tries to turn back to escape, all those hairs push the poor bug back down into a pool of thick digestive juice that waits at the bottom. How hungry is this plant? Well, in a two-week period, one 2-foot tall specimen ate

73 cockroaches!

Oddly enough, the larvae of some fly and mosquito species love these putrid pools of bug puree, and hang out there eating the partially digested bug remains.

California's boggy wetlands are the home of a plant that thinks

trapped. But its journey to the dinner table has only just begun.

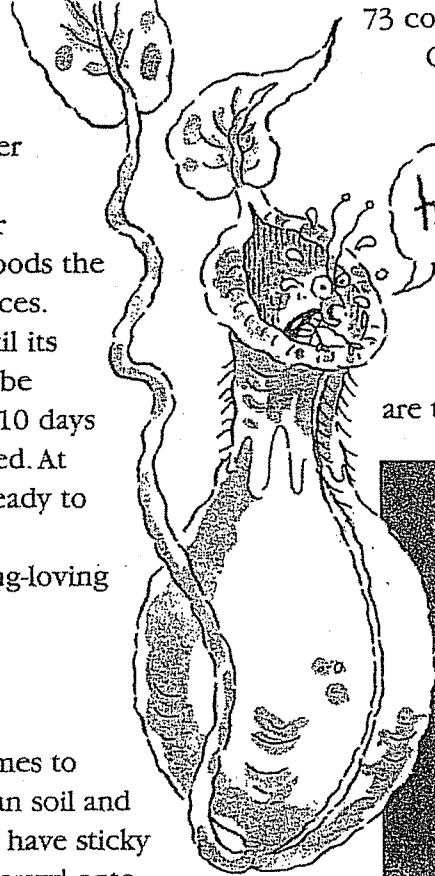
The plant waits about an hour (good food takes time) before it floods the bug's tiny prison with digestive juices. The ant soaks in the vile liquid until its body gets soft and mushy and can be absorbed by the plant. It will take 10 days for this splendid meal to be digested. At that point, the trap swings open, ready to snag some more supper.

But flytraps aren't the only bug-loving blooms out there. No sirree. . .

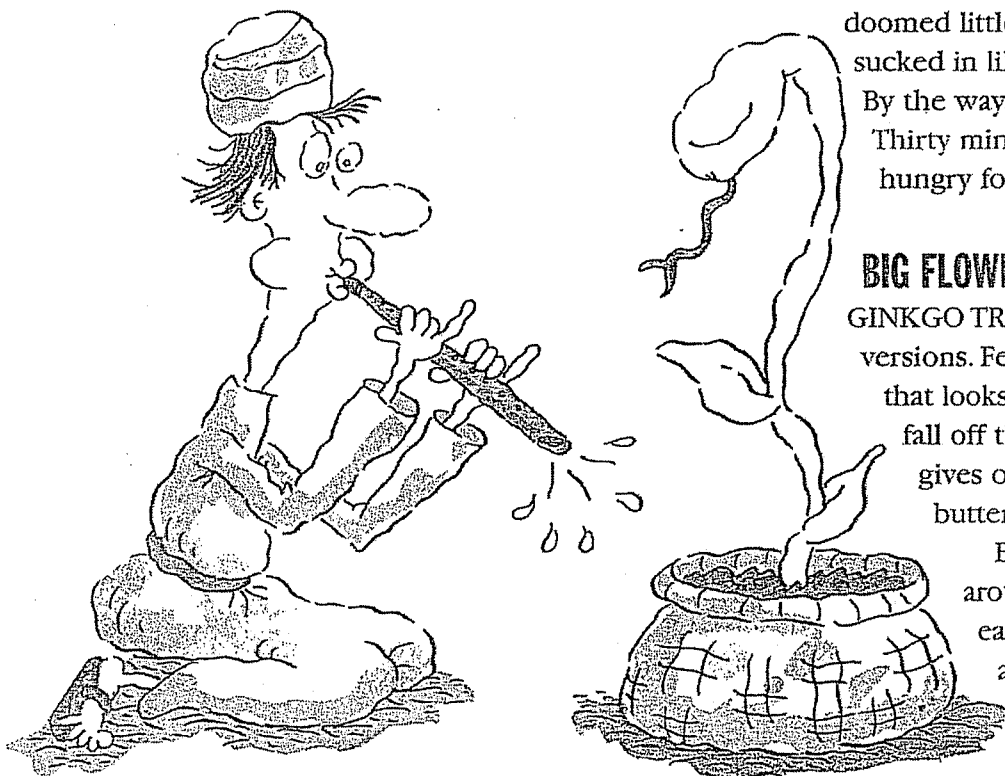
BUG CRUNCHERS

Flytraps have company when it comes to plants that like something more than soil and water to snack on. BUTTERWORTS have sticky glands all over their leaves. Insects crawl onto the leaves or land on them and get glued in place. (They are like those glue traps for mice.) The leaves—sensing a meal—then roll up on the poor bugs, unrolling only after the bugs have been completely dissolved by the plant's digestive juices.

And then there's the PITCHER PLANT. It



it's a snake. The COBRA PLANT has leaves that look like the heads of snakes with big, red forked "tongues" covered in spiky, slanted hairs. You know those spikes that stick out of the ground in parking garages and make it impossible to back up without ripping apart the car's tires? These hairs work the same way. Bugs that try to crawl backward get pricked by them, and so they have no choice but to move forward into the digestive soup in the bottom of the leaf. There they'll be slowly digested.



The SUNDEW is the octopus of the plant world. Its leaves are covered with tentacles, each of which has a small, shiny drop of a super-sticky substance on it. Insects whizzing by see those glistening droplets and think, "Oh, yum! Snack food!" But the bug making this blunder will end up trapped—stuck fast with no way out. The tentacles hold the poor creature tightly in the leaf. Escape is impossible! As the victim struggles helplessly, enzymes produced by the glands in the leaf begin to slowly digest its body. What a way to die!

FISHING FOR COMPLIMENTS?

Try fishing for food! BLADDERWORTS are carnivorous plants that live in swamps or slow-moving streams. These green gobblers wait, drooling a substance that lures their tiny prey. Each stem has many small, bladder-like containers, each with a trapdoor that opens inward. Each trap also has tiny "trigger" hairs that cause the trapdoor to open and then shut. When a victim swims up and brushes against one of the hairs, the door springs open. The doomed little water bug or tiny shrimp is sucked in like dust into a vacuum cleaner. By the way, bladderworts are fast eaters. Thirty minutes later, the trap is reset and hungry for another snack.

BIG FLOWER! BIG STINK!

GINKGO TREES come in male and female versions. Female ginkgos produce a seed that looks like a small cherry. When these fall off the tree, the coating rots and gives off an acid that reeks of rancid butter.

But they're not the only stinkers around. In the rain forests of Southeast Asia, a parasite that grows on a vine produces the world's largest flower. It's called the RAFFLESIA (*rah-flee-zhee-uh*), and each individual blossom can measure up to 3 feet in diameter.

However, if you're thinking of surprising someone with one of these monster blooms, be warned. The flower smells like 10-day-old dead cat, a stink that insects in the area adore. (Locals call it the "corpse flower" because it smells like death.)

There's also the SKUNK CABBAGE, which is one of the first plants to flower each year. Named after the grand stinker of the animal kingdom, it sends out a springtime stink-alarm—a foul smell that wakes up all the hiber-



[Small, illegible text caption]

nating flies and gnats that are still snoozing under dead leaves. Look for them in wet, swampy areas, but steer clear. The leaves and roots contain crystals that can burn your throat and stomach if you get any in your mouth. A weird thing, though . . . black bears dig up and eat the toxic roots in the spring to unplug their intestines after the long winter fast! Bet you didn't know there were bear laxatives!

And let's not forget **STINKING BENJAMIN**, which grows in the woodlands east of the Mississippi and has beautiful white petals—that smell like dirty socks.

PRETTY POISON

Ever heard the warning, "Leaves of three, let them be?" Ivy is pretty. But **POISON IVY** can leave you so that you'll want to rip your own skin off. **POISON OAK** is a very close relative of that bad ivy—they're the same species. The only difference is that one grows in moist, shady forests, and the other sprouts in drier, sunnier places. **POISON SUMAC** is another plant that will make your flesh crawl. It has

clusters of 7 to 13 poisonous leaves, not 3. Toxic oils in the leaves are the culprits in all three plants. Although there are medicines that can help soothe the nasty rashes caused by these plants, the best thing is to do everything possible to avoid touching them in the first place. So look out! No matter where you are in America, there's a poison something growing nearby. Learn to recognize the enemy, and keep your eyes open!

And watch out for **SPURGES**, a plant family that includes those pretty Christmas **POINSETTIAS**. Spurges grow all over the world and most contain a bitter, milky sap that can burn your skin and is poisonous if eaten. One spurge called **SNOW-ON-THE-MOUNTAIN** is so toxic that the bees that visit its flowers produce poison honey!

And speaking of Christmas . . . resist the urge to snack on the **HOLLY** and **MISTLETOE** hanging from the mantel. They are both poisonous!

