

Venus Fly Traps

GENERAL INFORMATION

Some plants live in situations where their roots cannot obtain sufficient nutrients, and so they have evolved mechanisms to trap insects and then digest the contents of their bodies. These meat-eaters are classified as carnivores - sort of the Tyrannosaurus Rex of plants. It is fun to grow one of these plants and helpful too. You can keep your house free from flies and other insects while your plant gets the food it needs to grow. The Venus Fly Trap grows wild only in the swamps of North Carolina and is no more than a foot high.

LIGHT AND TEMPERATURE

On a sunny windowsill the plant leaves will be red with a green edge. In the shade, the leaves will be all green.

WATER AND SOIL

Fly Traps need to be grown in a pot containing a mixture of fine sand and peat fiber with living sphagnum moss around the plant. If you can't find these things at the store, ask the garden center clerk for help. You may be able to find good soil substitutes for growing your plant. Place the pot in a saucer of water so that the root tips will always be moist. Water with rainwater; keep the compost constantly moist and the surrounding air humid.

FERTILIZE

Not required

PROPAGATION

You can grow from your own seed if you are a patient gardener. Start with a pot of moist, sandy soil mixed with chopped sphagnum peat moss. Scatter the seed on top of the soil, put the pot inside a plastic bag and sit it in a warm space away from direct sunlight. It will take one to three months before any little seedlings appear. If that seems too long to wait, try to get the seeds to sprout faster by placing them on a damp tissue or paper towel covered with clear plastic.

COMMENTS

In springtime the Venus flytrap has pretty white flowers on slender stalks, but the leaves are really the best part of this plant. The leaves have tiny trigger hairs that are so sensitive they will signal the lobes to move if you touch them. Sometimes you will have to touch the leaf a second time to get it to move because the trap only works if two hairs are touched or if one hair is touched twice. This "safety mechanism" is the plant's way of making sure it has caught a live insect and not just a leaf or piece of grass. Only a tiny creature like an ant can escape the Flytrap; when that happens it will take up to a day for the leaves to open completely again. As the plant is shutting, fluid oozes out of the inner surfaces of the lobes and the trapped insect is drowned. In 8 to 10 days the trap opens and is ready to work again. A plant will usually catch and digest about three meals before it withers and dies.