

## Pitcher Plants By Susan Heath

Have you heard of a Pitcher Plant? It's one of four carnivorous types of plants that live in Texas. A carnivorous plant? Yes! Carnivorous plants meet most of their nutritional needs through the fluids and soft body parts of insects rather than getting nutrients solely from the soil like other plants.

The four types of carnivorous plants in Texas are the Pale Pitcher Plant, Sundew (two species), Bladderwort (five species), and Butterwort. All four of these plants can be found in the Big Thicket National Preserve in east Texas and there are specific trails where each can be found. The Pitcher Plant Trail near Warren, Texas is fantastic this time of year. There are Pitcher Plants as far as the eye can see and they are both beautiful and fascinating.

The Pale Pitcher Plant is long and tubular, with an opening or mouth at the top of the plant. The opening is shaded by a leaf that curves gently over it. These plants lure insects to the mouth of their tube with color, nectar and scent. The flowers are even meat-colored to attract insects!

Once an insect lands on the lip of the tube and begins to enter, the waxy inner surface of the tube causes the insect to slide down inside. To add to the trap, downward pointing hairs prevent the insect from being able to climb back out. The bottom of the tube is filled with fluid, so once the doomed bug has slid down all the way, it drowns and can then be digested. Yum!

The Pitcher Plant trap is called a pit fall trap because the insect falls into a pit formed by the tubular shape of the plant. The more widely known Venus Flytrap uses a snap trap, in which the leaves actually snap shut on an insect. The snap is triggered when the insect is detected by tiny hairs inside the trap.

Sundews and Butterworts use "flypaper" traps which work exactly like human flypaper. The insect gets stuck in the gooey mess and can't get free. Bladderworts have tiny bladders under the water that have very sensitive hairs. When the hairs sense movement, the flattened bladder suddenly inflates, sucking water and the insect inside.

Worldwide, there are nearly six hundred species of carnivorous plants, and the number increases every year because more species are still being discovered. Sadly, about one quarter of carnivorous plants are threatened with extinction from human driven causes.

Some species of carnivorous plants make good house plants including the Pitcher Plant but you should never dig up a wild one. There are plenty of places online to buy them. I highly suggest going and walking the Pitcher Plant Trail in the Big Thicket. It's beautiful and the plants are really cool!

Photo by Sue Heath

Caption: Pitcher Plants at the Big Thicket National Preserve.