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Get the facts

How can plants be killers?

Some plants are **poisonous**. They may kill people, or animals, who eat them.

Some plants kill other plants by taking over their **habitats** (the places where they live).

Some plants even kill other creatures for food.

How?

All plants make **food** from **sunlight**, but they need other things as well. They usually get these from the soil.

In places where the soil is poor, some plants have found other ways to get the extra things they need.

They turned into meat-eaters!

What meat do they eat?

Most **carnivorous** (meat-eating) plants eat **insects**—but some may eat bigger creatures!

Did it really?

In 2006 a plant growing in a **botanical garden** in France ate a **mouse!**

The body of the mouse was found inside the plant after visitors **complained** about the **smell**.



The tree of death

The **bunya-bunya tree** is known as the **tree of death**. The cones weigh up to 15 pounds. If you are walking under one of these trees and a cone falls on your head, you'll probably end up dead.

(If you survive, you can eat the nuts in the cone—they taste great!)



Carnivorous plants

How
do plants
catch other
creatures?

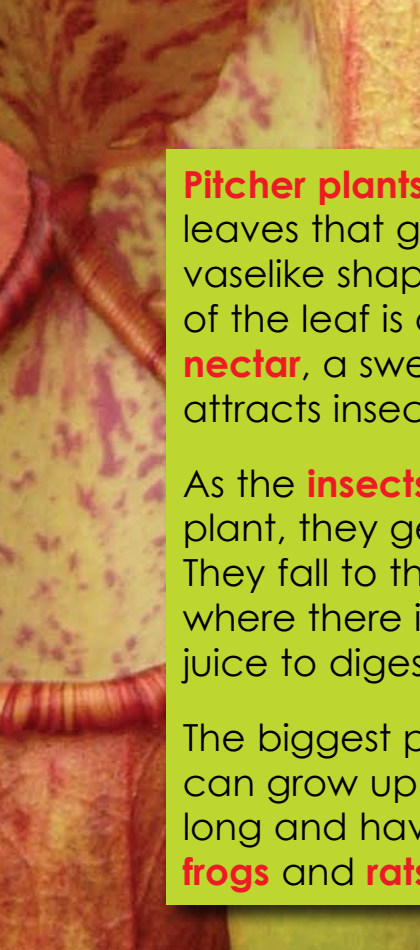


The **sundew** has **sticky hairs** on its leaves. Once an insect lands on the plant, it can't escape.

These hairs make **digestive juices**, as well as the sticky stuff, and the prey is soon eaten.

When an insect lands on the leaves of the **Venus flytrap**, its leaves close over the insect and trap it.






Pitcher plants have leaves that grow in a vaselike shape. This part of the leaf is covered with **nectar**, a sweet stuff that attracts insects.

As the **insects** go into the plant, they get trapped. They fall to the bottom, where there is a pool of juice to digest them.

The biggest pitcher plants can grow up to 11 inches long and have eaten **frogs** and **rats**!



The fastest killers, **bladderworts**, use a sort of trapdoor to get their prey. They can suck in an insect in .02 seconds!

Deadly poisons



Do you know a plant that contains the deadly poison **cyanide**?



Here's one—an apple!



The **poison** is in the **seeds**—but you would have to eat hundreds of them to get ill.

And if you don't chew them, they will pass straight through you.

Some plants have parts that are good to eat but have **leaves, roots, or seeds** that are **poisonous**.



Rhubarb is good to eat raw or cooked, but the leaves are poisonous! Luckily, you would have to eat quite a lot of them—and they don't taste good!

Potatoes and **tomatoes** belong to the same plant family. Both have parts that are poisonous enough to make you ill.

Don't eat their leaves or shoots. (Or the potato fruits that look just like baby tomatoes!)



So what is the world's most dangerous plant?

These **castor bean** seeds look harmless, but they can kill.

They contain a poison called **ricin**.

This is **12,000 times** more toxic than rattlesnake venom!



In 1978 a man was **murdered** in **London**. A pellet of **ricin** was shot into his leg from a gun disguised as an umbrella.



Deadly fungi

Death cap



It's easy to pick **poisonous mushrooms** by mistake. So if you feel like going hunting for wild fungi to eat— **W**

The **biggest killer** of humans is the **death cap**.

If you eat this, you will feel dizzy and find it hard to breathe. Then you'll begin feeling very sick. After about three days, you'll think you are getting better.

Are you? Sorry, no! Your **liver** is being **destroyed**. After about **six days**, you will probably **die!**

Ergot

Ergot is a tiny fungus that grows on wheat. Sometimes people eat the fungus with the wheat. It causes a burning feeling in the arms and legs. Then people start to see things that aren't there. It can be a **killer**.





At the end of the 17th century, people in the town of **Salem, Massachusetts**, thought that there were **witches** living there.

It started when some people began to have fits. They screamed, threw things, and said they were being pricked by pins.

What
is the biggest
living thing in
the world?

A whale? A tree?

No! It's a **fungus!**

The biggest **honey fungus** in the world is in Oregon. It is more than **two thousand years old**, covers an area of nearly six square miles, and it's a **killer**.

It doesn't kill people, though. It kills other plants. And when they're dead, it feeds on their **rotting remains** . . .

Dozens of people were accused of being witches. They were **hanged**.

Some people think that the whole town had eaten flour with **ergot** in it and that this caused the problem.



Honey
fungus

Invasion of the killer aliens

Plants that escape into new **habitats** are called **aliens**—and they can be deadly!



People with gardens like to grow plants that are **new** and **different**. They like plants that come from **distant countries**.

Sometimes, this is a really bad idea!

Gardeners in Europe thought **floating pennywort** from North America was just the thing for their ponds.

But it escaped into the wild, and grew like a **thick mat** over the water, using up **oxygen** needed by fish and other creatures.

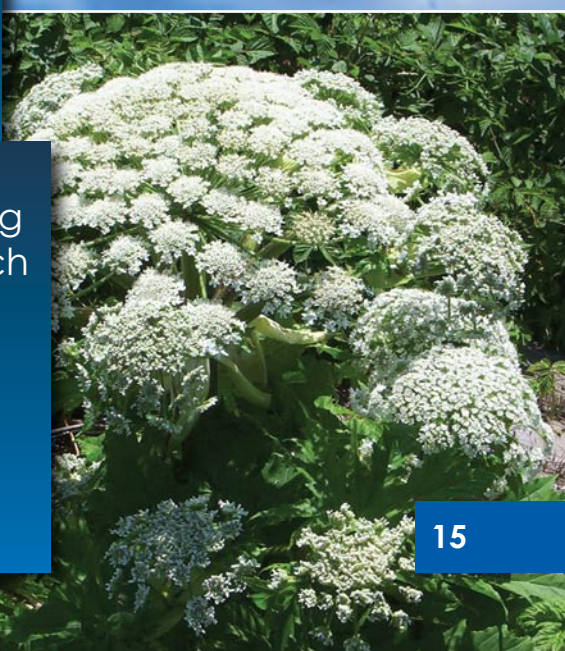




One of the worst invaders is **Japanese knotweed**.

It can grow through walls, paths, and roads, and it causes a lot of problems. It is hard to get rid of it as it will grow from very tiny pieces.

In many countries it is **against the law** to plant it. But the Japanese knotweed just keeps on growing . . .



Watch out—there's a giant lurking down by the river that can injure you. **Giant hogweed** is huge—and it's crowding out native plants.

It has a great way of defending itself—if you touch the plant, it has **chemicals** that can **burn** you. Spreading this plant is against the law.

Frankencrops

People have always tried to change the plants they grow. They want flowers to smell better or to have lots of different colors.

They want to make food crops that will **taste better** or will feed more people. They want to grow food crops that **insects** won't want to eat.



In the past it took a long time to develop new plants, but now **scientists** can make big changes very quickly by changing the **genes** in the plants.



Some people think that it is bad to change plants like this. They call food made from GM (**genetically modified**) crops "**Frankenfood**."



(Frankenstein's monster is a character from a story. In the story, the monster is made from odd bits of other people's bodies. The monster isn't friendly and kills people.)

Protest over GM crops

Arguments for GM plants

- ✓ There is no proof that GM foods are unsafe.
- ✓ GM plants can be made to grow with less water.
- ✓ They can be made to resist pests and plant viruses.
- ✓ They will help to feed people in developing countries.

What
do you
think?

Arguments against GM plants

- ✗ GM plants might affect existing food crops if their pollen spreads.
- ✗ GM crops might harm wild animals, birds, and insects.





Where's **Mr. Potts?**



Chapter 1

Look at this!

Mr. Potts loved growing things. He grew flowers. He grew vegetables. He grew shrubs and trees.

But, best of all, he liked growing things from seed. Not just seeds from packets. That was too easy. What he really liked was growing the seeds from foods he had eaten. If food had a seed, he planted it.

One day in the greenhouse, he found a strange seed. He showed it to his next-door neighbor, Mrs. Dyer.

“Look at this,” he said. “I’ve never seen anything like it.”



I've never seen a seed like this, Mrs. Dyer.

Mr. Potts found a strange seed in his greenhouse. He showed it to his neighbor.

“What are you going to do with it?” asked Mrs. Dyer.

“Plant it, of course,” he said.

The seed grew quickly. Mr. Potts talked to it every day. He thought talking to plants made them grow better.

“You are a pretty little thing,” he told the shoot. “What lovely leaves you have.”

It grew really well.



What are you going to do with it?

Plant it, of course!

The plant started to grow . . .

What a beautiful plant you are!

Mr. Potts talked to his plants. He thought it made them grow better!

Chapter 2

The flower

“Look!” he said to Mrs. Dyer. “It’s got a bud.”

The plant grew taller.

“I will have to feed it,” he told Mrs. Dyer.

“How do you feed a plant?” asked Mrs. Dyer. “It doesn’t have a mouth.”

Mr. Potts laughed.

“This,” he said. “It’s plant food. I put it in the water.”



It's got a bud. I shall have to feed it.



The plant grew and grew.

Mr. Potts took it out of its pot and planted it in the soil. The flower opened. It was huge.

“What is it?” asked Mrs. Dyer.

“It’s called a pitcher plant,” said Mr. Potts. “But I didn’t know they could get so big.”

They watched the plant. A bee landed on the edge of the flower. It buzzed loudly and tried to fly off. It slipped into the trumpet. It buzzed even louder.

Then it stopped.



What is it?

It's a pitcher plant. I didn't know they could grow so big.

A bee landed on the flower.

The bee suddenly stopped buzzing!

Chapter 3

The heap of bones

"It's eaten the bee," said Mr. Potts.

"Ugh!" said Mrs. Dyer.

"What's that smell?" asked Mrs. Dyer.

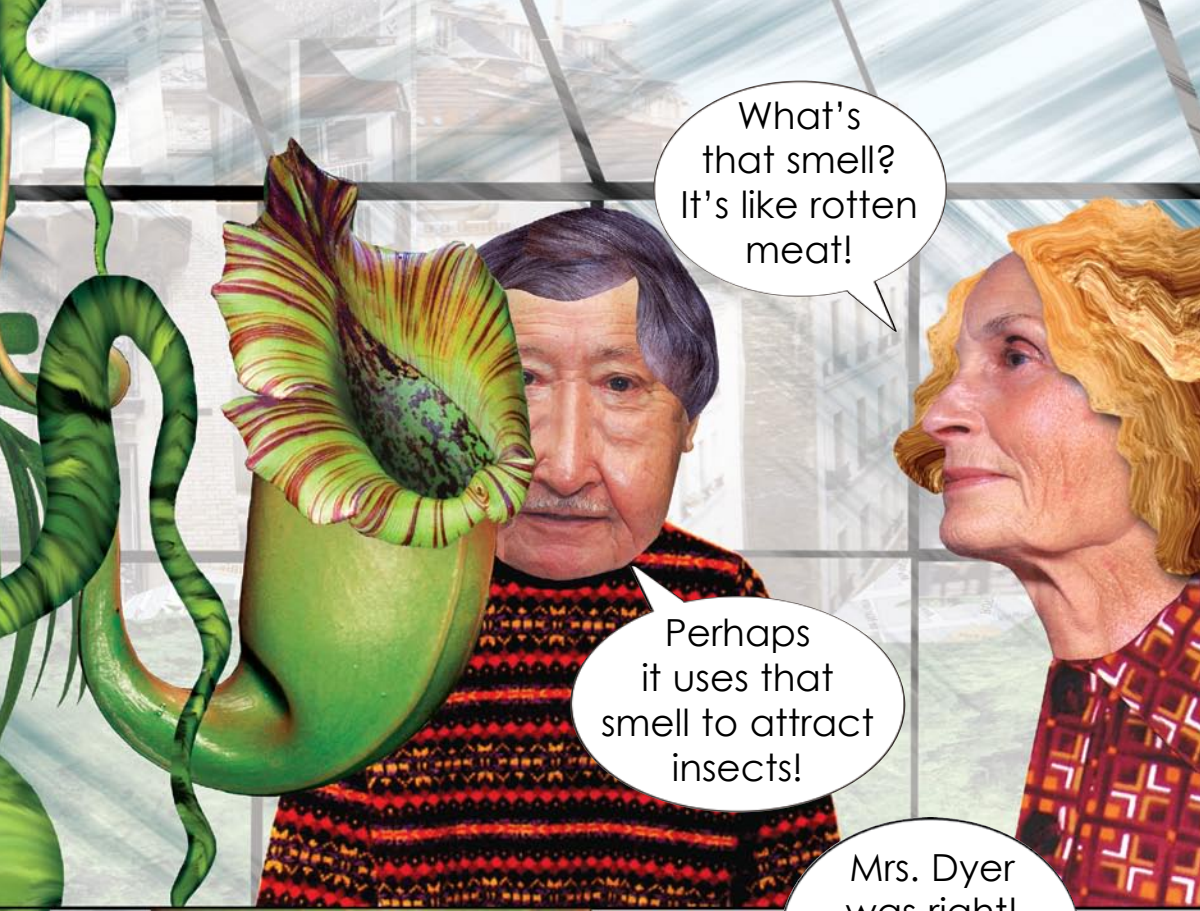
"That's how it attracts insects," said Mr. Potts.

"It's very bad," said Mrs. Dyer. "It smells like rotten meat."

Later that night, Mr. Potts went to say good night to his plant.

Under the flower was a heap of bones.

"It's eaten a mouse," thought Mr. Potts. "That's what the smell was."



What's that smell?
It's like rotten meat!

Perhaps it uses that smell to attract insects!

Mrs. Dyer was right!
It's eaten a mouse!



Mrs. Dyer brought some meat scraps over.

“Do you think it would like these?” she asked.


“You look upset,” said Mr. Potts. “Is everything alright?”

“Have you seen my cat around?” asked Mrs. Dyer. “He hasn’t been home for two days, and I’m a bit worried.”

“Oh dear!” said Mr. Potts. “I’ll keep a lookout.”

Mr. Potts went to say good night to his plant.

Under the flower was a heap of bones.



Next day, Mrs. Dyer brought some meat scraps for the plant . . .

I'll keep a lookout.

Have you seen my cat, Mr. Potts? It hasn't been home for two days!

That night, Mr. Potts went to check up on the plant . . .

Chapter 4

What can I give it tomorrow?

Mr. Potts looked at the bones. “They look like cat bones,” he thought.

He looked at the plant. “You’re growing too fast,” he said. “You mustn’t eat cats!”

“I know!” he told it. “I’ll find you a nice steak.”

Mr. Potts was worried. The plant was still growing. And it was hungry.

“It’s costing me a fortune,” he thought. “Whatever can I feed it next?”



They look like cat bones!

The plant was still hungry! What could Mr. Potts feed it next?

“Mr. Potts,” called Mrs. Dyer. “Where are you?”

There was no one in the house. Mrs. Dyer went to the greenhouse.

The plant was even bigger. It reached right up to the roof.

Under the flower was a heap of bones. Mrs. Dyer bent over to look at them.

And, as she bent over, so did the flower . . .

After a while Mr. Potts came out of his shed.

Under the flower was a pair of boots.

“Now,” thought Mr. Potts. “What can I give it tomorrow?”



Mr. Potts!
Where are
you?

Mr. Potts had been
working in his shed.

Now,
what can I
feed the plant
tomorrow?

Killer Plants word check

aliens

habitat

carnivorous

nectar

cyanide

oxygen

developing countries

poisonous

digestive

pollen

fungi

prey

genes

venom

GM (genetically
modified)

virus

Fact to Fiction

Get the facts: Plants can't hurt you, right? Wrong. Meet the killer plants. These plants don't bother with sunlight or water. They eat meat instead. Insects, rats, mice . . . Remember—you could be next!

Find out which bean is 12,000 times more poisonous than rattlesnake venom.

Fiction: Then read the story *Where's Mr. Potts?* You'll be a bit more careful the next time you cut some flowers.

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