

Carnivorous Plants in the Shire of Esperance

What are carnivorous plants?

Carnivorous plants are plants that catch and eat insects and other tiny animals. They catch them by using different kinds of traps. Once they have caught something they produce digestive liquids that break down their prey into nutrients that they can absorb.

Why are they carnivorous?

Most carnivorous plants grow in swampy areas where the soil doesn't contain all of the nutrients that they need to grow. They particularly need nitrogen, and they can't get all they need from wet swampy soil. By catching insects they can obtain the extra nutrients that they need to grow and produce flowers and seeds.



Artwork by Nicolás González Hernández on [pinterest.com.au](https://www.pinterest.com.au)

Types of carnivorous plants in our region

The best known carnivorous plants are the Venus Flytrap and pitcher plants. Sometimes these are sold in nurseries, and sometimes they are sold at Bunnings. **None of these occur in our region**, although the Albany Pitcher Plant occurs in swamps away to our west.

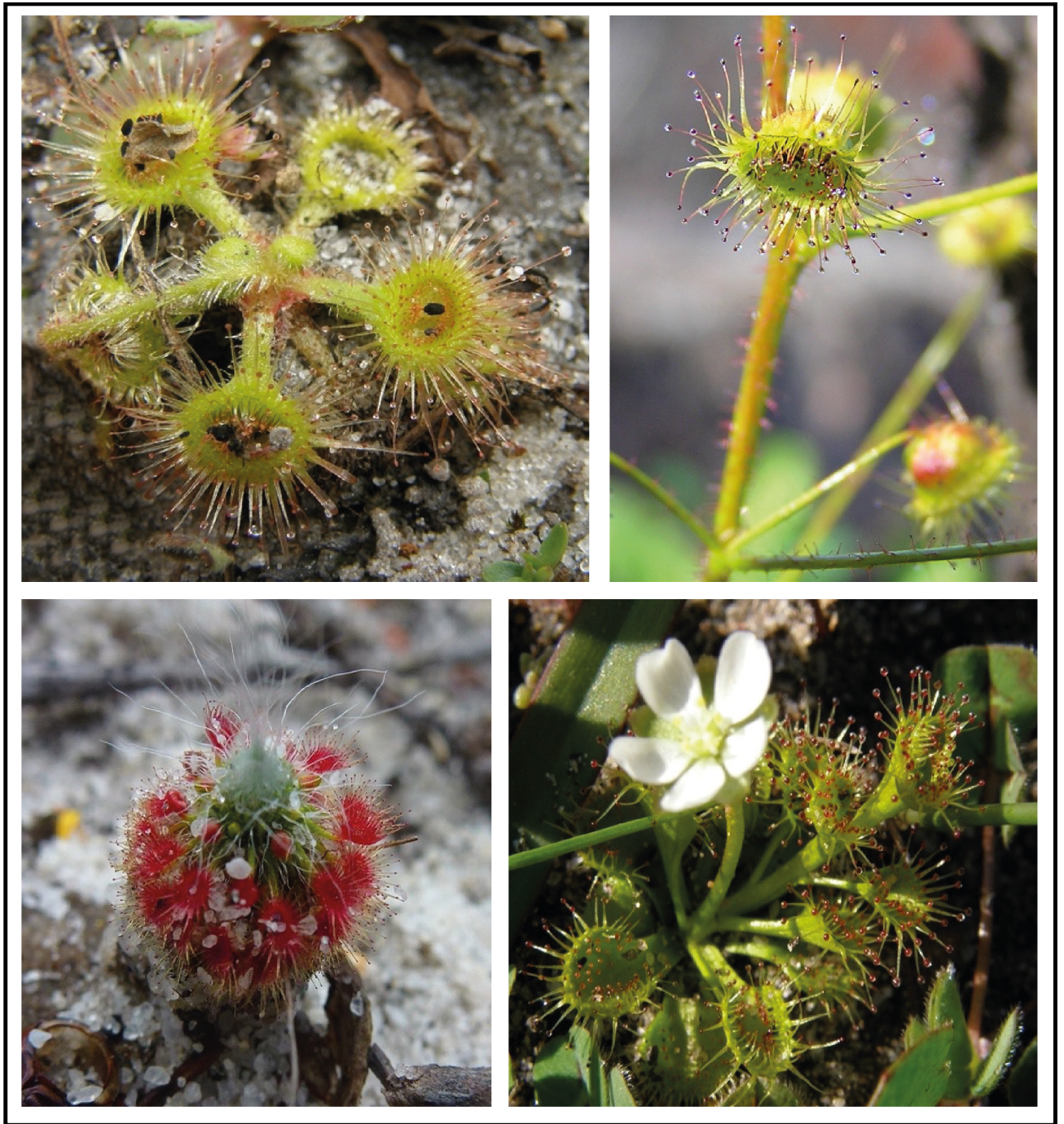
We do have quite a few other kinds of carnivorous plants though – there are 36 different species of them in the Shire of Esperance. You might be familiar with the sundews or rainbow plants which catch insects with their sticky leaves.

The carnivorous plants in our area use three different strategies to catch their prey. Some have leaves like sticky flypaper, and others have leaves like traps that capture anything that comes too close.

Plants with flypaper traps - Sundews and Rainbow Plants

These plants have leaves with lots of long sticky hairs that work like flypaper. If an insect lands on them it gets stuck and can't escape. The scientific name of these plants is *Drosera* and there are 24 different kinds in our area. Some of them are tiny, and others are creepers that climb up other shrubs that grow near them.

Even the tiny ones have interesting flowers, which can be white, pink, yellow or orange. The size and shape of their leaves varies, but they all have similar sticky hairs for trapping insects.



Some different *Drosera* plants showing the sticky leaves used to trap insects. Photos: M Hoggart

Even the very small plants produce some spectacular flowers. In spring, the climbing species can be seen with clusters of white or pink flowers. Some others have yellow flowers, while one of the smallest plants has orange flowers that look like they are made out of metal.



Drosera flowers. Photos: M Hoggart

Plants with suction traps – the Bladderworts

These plants have traps that are like tiny purses. One type has no roots and floats about in water. Others grow in wet ground in swamps. Their traps have lots of tiny hairs that enable them to sense when an item of prey is near. If something touches one of the hairs, the trap springs open and water rushes inside it, carrying the prey with it. The trap then closes and the prey can't escape.

The scientific name for these plants is *Utricularia*. Esperance is an important area for these plants—10 different species occur within Cape Le Grand National Park. Three of these are found nowhere else.

One species, *Utricularia australis*, floats about in swamps, trapping tiny animals in the traps along its stem. When it flowers it send a stem above the water and produces an attractive yellow flower. The remaining species grow in the wet mud at the bottom of shallow swamps or in wet soils. Their traps are hidden in the soil, where they catch their prey.

Utricularia flowers can be tiny or quite large, and come in a variety of shapes and colours.



Utricularia australis plant with leaf traps and flower. Photos: T Kreuger, M Hoggart



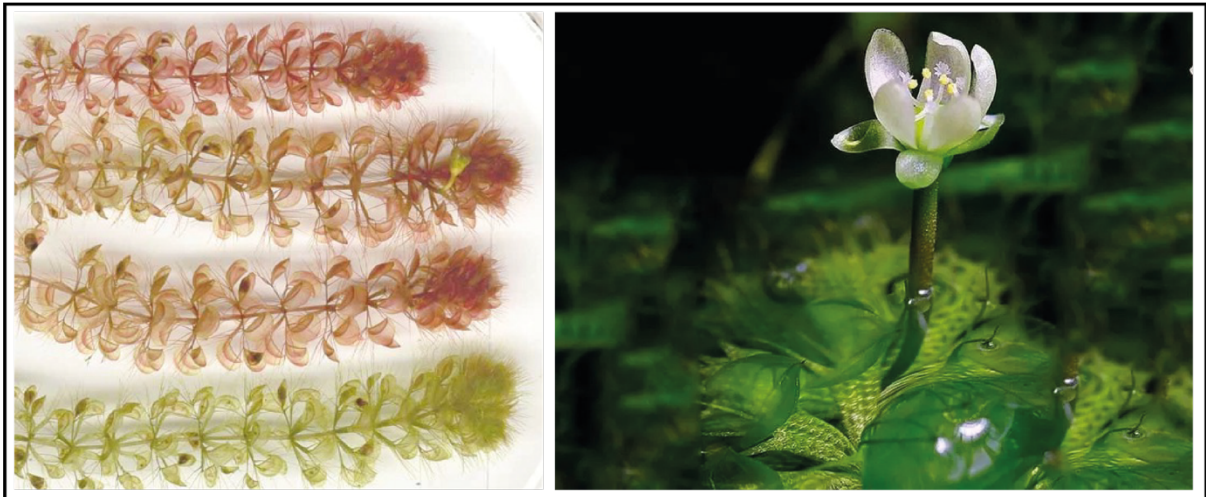
Utricularia flowers – different shapes and colours. Photos: T Krueger

Plants with snap traps – the Waterwheel Plant

We only have one plant that has traps like this. It is another plant that floats around in swamp water. It has traps arranged in a circle around its stems. Its leaves are all traps which have sensitive hairs to detect prey. If a prey species enters a trap, it snaps shut imprisoning its victim.

It has small white flowers in summer that are held above the surface of the water on short stems.

This plant is both rare and difficult to find, and has only been seen by a few people. It occurs in a few swamps near Cape Le Grand National Park. Its scientific name is *Aldrovanda vesiculosa*.



Aldrovanda vesiculosa stems and flower. Photos: www.researchgate.net, www.plantsrescue.com

Further information about carnivorous plants can be obtained by contacting local botanist Ken Mills by email on xenus40@westnet.com.au.

Ken Mills
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