

# How to Grow Carnivorous Plants in Skagit Valley

By Anita Reetz  
December 9, 2016



## An easy job under proper conditions

Carnivorous plants can be attractive additions to home gardens here in Skagit Valley provided you supply proper soil, water and light conditions.

### Soil

Peat is the most important ingredient in the mix. It is produced in a swampy area where plants and trees are decaying in an acidic, anaerobic environment. Water, especially moving water, dissolves minerals in the soil. What's left can be just rock, gravel, pumice and/or sand. At the Discovery Garden, we use sphagnum peat and vermiculite or perlite when we mix the soil.

Sphagnum peat can hold more than ten times its weight in water. It is very acidic with a pH of 3-5 (a neutral acid-alkaline balance is 7). When buying, be sure sphagnum appears with the word peat on the packaging. Sphagnum peat, washed sand, vermiculite and perlite are available locally at most farm and garden stores.

At the Discovery Garden after much research and trial and error, we have arrived at the following mix ratios:

- Pitcher plants and cobras—1:1 ratio of sphagnum peat to perlite, vermiculite or sand
- Sundews and Venus flytraps— 2:1 ratio of sphagnum peat to perlite, vermiculite or sand
- (Washed sand can also substitute for half the perlite or vermiculite at a 1:1 ratio)

Use a plastic tub or wheelbarrow for mixing, depending on the number of plants. A 6"-8" flower pot works well for measuring.

Break up any peat clumps to create a fluffy, airy consistency. Measure one full pot of peat per plant into the tub or wheelbarrow for mixing. Add water to create a wet mud. Rainwater is best, but tap water will work too as long as it is not too high in mineral content (below 100 parts per million). To the peat mud, add an equal amount of perlite or vermiculite (or half perlite/vermiculite and half washed sand) for pitcher and cobra plants (1:1). For sundews and Venus flytraps follow a 2:1 ratio of peat to perlite/vermiculite.

Fill a flower pot with half the soil mix; then place the plant in the pot and gently fill the pot with the rest of the mix. Water again. Change the soil every two years.



The Venus flytrap is one of several carnivorous plants that can be grown in the Skagit Valley. *Photo by SARRACENIA.COM.*

### **Watering**

Plastic or glazed ceramic pots holding the carnivorous plants should be placed in a container that can be filled with water up to one-third the height of the pot. Several pots can rest in a plastic tub or tray. Single plants should be in saucers that can hold at least an inch of water. Make sure the tray that the plants rest in never dries out. Overhead watering is not recommended for Venus flytraps or sundews, because they are small and delicate. Natural rain, however, is welcomed by all.

### **Sunlight**

The more sun the better. For vibrant colors and sturdy plants, five-plus hours of direct sunlight is best. You cannot overexpose carnivorous plants to the sun. In the Discovery Garden, *Sarracenia* species and cobras are shaded in the morning, but receive sun all afternoon. Indoors, sunlight for half a day should be adequate. Best exposure is east, south or southeast. If the plant becomes faded, lacks coloration and droops, move it to a sunnier spot.

### **Location**

Carnivorous plants tolerate a number of locations, indoors and out. Of course, outdoors is their natural location. They will thrive in a bog, in a greenhouse, in containers that can be kept very moist or in a water-filled tray.

Carnivorous plants are especially attractive on patios and decks. Indoors, the plants will do fine on a windowsill or in a stand near a large window. While carnivorous plants have a range of natural habitats, not all will flourish inside the house. Pitcher plants and most of their hybrids, cobras, sundews and Venus flytraps are best at adapting to growing inside. Terrariums in the house are another eye-catching option.



Sarracenia species can make a colorful addition to a collection of carnivorous plants. *Photo by Nancy Crowell / WSU Skagit County Extension Master Gardeners.*

plants kept inside, the sundews can remain, but the others want dormancy, so will do better outside in winter. The plants naturally revive in the spring, and with all the dead material removed, you can watch new shoots appear.

Please visit the carnivorous plant collection at the Discovery Garden on Memorial Highway in Mount Vernon, open year round from dawn to dusk.

For further information on carnivorous plants, visit your local library or check out the numerous Internet Websites.

### **Winterizing**

The dormant period for carnivorous plants is November to February. All require a rest period of three to four months except cape sundews. When the leaves turn brown, remove dead material to prevent root rot.

Yellow trumpets stuffed with insect exoskeletons should be cut to the green base, or if completely brown, pulled out. Purple pitchers will keep their leaves over winter. Sundews produce a tight winter nesting bed to protect themselves from low temperatures. Venus flytraps lose outer leaves, but retain inner leaves and turn into a small, flat basal rosette. A pine needle mulch is recommended for Venus flytraps and sundews.

In Skagit Valley, early November is a good time for winter prep. The plants still need water. All *Sarracenias*, cobra lilies and Venus flytraps can withstand freezing temperatures to 5 degrees F, so leaving them outside or in a cold greenhouse is generally safe.

At the Discovery Garden, we cover the collection with pine boughs and a polyester gardening cloth on top. For carnivorous

## **RESOURCES:**

- D'Amato, Peter. *Savage Garden*. 1998.
- Hewitt-Cooper, Nigel. *Carnivorous Plants*. 2016.
- “International Carnivorous Plant Society.”  
<http://www.carnivorousplants.org/howto/> 2016.
- “Winter Preparation for Carnivorous Plants.”  
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=T4bjvXvGHBA> 2016.

*Anita Reetz is a Washington State University/Skagit County Master Gardener. Questions may be submitted to the WSU Extension Office, 11768 Westar Lane, Suite A, Burlington, WA 98233. 360-428-4270 or [skagit.wsu.edu/MG](http://skagit.wsu.edu/MG).*