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Science for Santa's Sack

(Continued from p. 315)

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Nature Note

Venus's Flytrap

► THE VENUS'S FLYTRAP, *Dionaea muscipula*, is a small, curious plant with clusters of delicate white flowers and leaves like fast steel traps.

These bright green leaves, about the size of a nickel, are composed of two semicircular flat lobes, hinged in the middle and fringed along the edges with stiff bristles. On the inner surfaces of each of these highly specialized leaves are three long slender trigger hairs which are very sensitive to the touch.

When a fly, gnat or some other insect alights on the leaf and comes in contact with these sensitive hairs, a special area extending the full length of the midrib between the two leaf halves suddenly loses its turgor and the two parts of the leaves snap shut. The fringe bristles interlace like fingers of two folding hands, and the insect is trapped between prison bars.

If the insect is small and fast enough, it can sometimes escape through the enmeshing bristles, but usually it is trapped and squeezed firmly against the digestive glands located on the inner leaf sides. Slowly the insect body is digested as the plant assimilates the protein for its own nourishment.

After a few hours, the leaf spreads open again, exposing the indigestible remains of the insect which blow or fall away, leaving the trap ready for the next victim.

This strange insectivorous plant grows close to the ground where it is relatively inconspicuous. The leaves are usually in a rosette formation, spreading outward from the central stalk which bears clusters of small white flowers at its top. The plant is found only along the coastal bogs of North and South Carolina.

• Science News Letter, 86:318 November 14, 1964

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