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CHOMP! They Came from the Swamp

The Conservatory of Flowers' popular carnivorous plant exhibition returns, transforming the San Francisco landmark into a swampy paradise for meat-eating plants

April 11 – October 19, 2014

SAN FRANCISCO – Fall prey to some of the plant kingdom's most alluring and murderous creations this spring as the carnivores return to the Conservatory of Flowers in a new exhibit, *CHOMP! They Came from the Swamp*. On view April 11 – October 19, 2014, *CHOMP!* transforms the Conservatory's Special Exhibits Gallery into a swampy paradise for hundreds of meat-eating plants like the sinister pitcher plants of Borneo, the glistening sundews of South Africa and the sinuously curved cobra lilies of California. With many rare and unusual varieties, even the most squeamish will be captivated by the extraordinary beauty and diversity of plants on display.

Large models of several species throughout the exhibit also give visitors a taste of what it might be like to be a tiny insect in a world of towering meat eaters waiting for their next meal. Volunteer-led demonstration "feedings" and plant dissections will take place throughout the run of the exhibit as well.

"Carnivorous plants are one of the sure fire ways to get people excited about plants – kids especially," says Lau Hodges, Director of Operations and Exhibitions. "The exhibit gives visitors a fun bug's eye view of the plants, but also helps people understand why they have adapted to attract, capture and eat prey. It's one of the most amazing and irresistible stories of plant evolution there is."

The Plants and Their Trapping Strategies

Most carnivorous plants grow where the soil is poor, lacking in nutrients or too acidic so that over thousands of years, they have evolved to make the best of a challenging situation, trapping living things to get needed nutrients. Visitors can investigate the full spectrum of strategies these plants use to attract and kill their prey, from the familiar snap traps of the Venus flytrap to the lesser-known suction trap of the water-loving bladderwort.

Bladderworts (*Utricularia)* are the largest group of carnivores in the kingdom with over 200 species -- many of which are very small and innocent in appearance. These tiny killers, however, are the fastest acting of the carnivorous plants, sucking prey out of the water at a speed of up to 1/15,000th of a second. Although visitors will never be able to catch this plant in high-speed action, they will be delighted to learn how its trap is activated. A special trapdoor opens when mosquito larvae or some other small critter brushes against tiny trigger hairs. The plant slurps up victim, water and all. Once closed, it secretes a digestive enzyme to slowly consume its prey. When dinner is done, it ejects the husk while glands inside the bladder absorb the water the plant took in, thereby creating a vacuum and resetting the trap.

Sticky flypaper traps are the specialty of species like the sundews (*Drosera)* and butterworts (*Pinguicula*). The leaves of the sundew sport hundreds of pin-shaped red tentacles (actually stalked glands) which are covered with a mucusy secretion. When an insect lands, thinking this glistening surface might hold nectar, it gets stuck. As it struggles to free itself, the motion triggers other tentacles that bend towards it. Within a few minutes there is no escape as the entire leaf wraps over the victim and digestive enzymes are excreted to dissolve it. Butterworts employ a similar flypaper-like strategy and are distinguished for having some of the strongest natural glue known.

The pitcher plant (*Sarracenia* and *Nepenthes)* is an alluring example of a pitfall trap. With a brightly colored rim around the mouth and a teasingly half-open lid, these hollow pitchers full of watery nectar invite the curiosity of animals and insects. Walking on the rim is no problem, but woe is the critter that is tempted to take a sip of nectar. One false move and the unsuspecting victim is sent skiing down the slippery, waxy walls to a liquidy death because this is no ordinary drink of water. The liquid at the bottom of the pitcher is a digestive enzyme and once in, creatures are not likely to get out. The interior wall sports a mean set of downward pointing hairs to ensure that even the most avid climber cannot escape. Something small like a midge is digested in a few hours; a fly might take up to two days; and some of the largest Asian pitch plant species have been known to consume rats, lizards and even small monkeys.

The leaves of the Venus flytrap (*Dionaea)* open wide like gaping mouths. On the inside of the two lobes of the leaf are several stiff, short trigger hairs. When anything touches these hairs with enough force to bend them, the leaf snaps shut in less than one second, trapping its prey. If the object inside is not food, the trap will reopen slowly and 'spit' it out. But if it is a big, wriggling meal, the leaf will shut tightly in just a few minutes and form an airtight seal. It secretes digestive juices, which, over a week or two, break down the insect's soft, inner parts and then reabsorbs the liquid and reopens. The leftovers like the insect's hard exoskeleton blow away in the wind or get washed out by rain.

Surprisingly, the United States is home to the largest number of carnivorous plant genera. Visitors will be amazed to discover the unexpected treasure trove of homegrown killers like the purple pitcher plant that grows in chilly New England; its carnivorous cousin, the white trumpet plant, that some botanists speculate may be adapted to luminously lure in a bumper crop of bugs on full moon nights; the Venus flytrap, that only grows in one place on earth, North Carolina; and California's own cobra lily (*Darlingtonia californica*) whose bulbous green head and twisted red "tongue" make it a dead ringer for its namesake.

Other featured plants hail from many parts of the globe including South Africa where the widest variety of sundews can be found; Eastern Australia, known for its forked sundews that resemble living spider webs; and Mexico, home to the largest number of butterworts on the planet.

Media sponsors for the exhibition include KTVU FOX 2, KICU TV36 & SF Weekly.

The Conservatory of Flowers would like to acknowledge its exhibit partner, California Carnivores, for its generous support.

***CHOMP! They Came from the Swamp* is open Tuesdays – Sundays from 10 am to 4 pm and is included with admission to the Conservatory. Admission for San Francisco residents (with proof of residency) is $5 general; $3 youth 12-17, seniors and students with ID; $1.50 children 5-11; children 4 and under FREE. Admission for non-residents is $8 general, $5 youth 12-17, seniors and students with ID; $2 children 5-11; children 4 and under FREE. The public should call (415) 831-2090 or visit www.conservatoryofflowers.org for more information.**

Related Programming

Dangerous Beauty: Opening Night Gala and Fundraiser
Thursday, April 10, 2014
6:30 to 11 pm
$175 per person General admission
$100 per person Young Steward ticket (for ages 21-35 only)
$250 per person VIP reception (includes early entrance to the Gala at 5:30 p.m.)

Indulge your senses in a garden of deadly delights as San Francisco's historic Conservatory of Flowers presents an evening of music, dancing, exotic spirits, and … *Dangerous Beauty*. At this opening night jubilee and fundraising event, gala guests will be the first to see this spring's most fatal attraction *CHOMP! They Came from the Swamp* and have the rare chance to experience the magic of this lovely San Francisco landmark at night. The evening includes dancing to the live

music of the Dick Bright Orchestra and other special entertainment; botanical cocktails and exquisite nibbles by La Bonne, Grace Street, Joshua Charles Catering and Fork and Spoon; as well as a chance to bid on unique vacation packages, art, wine, jewelry and more. "Dangerous" cocktail attire encouraged. *All proceeds benefit the Conservatory of Flowers' youth education program, which offers free tours and teaching aides to all San Francisco schools*.

Background

The Conservatory of Flowers is a spectacular living museum of rare and beautiful tropical plants under glass. From Borneo to Bolivia, the 1,750 species of plants at the Conservatory represent unusual flora from more than 50 countries around the world. Immersive displays in five galleries include the lowland tropics, highland tropics, aquatic plants, potted plants, and special exhibits. Opened in 1879, the wood and glass greenhouse is the oldest existing conservatory in North America and has attracted millions of visitors to Golden Gate Park since it first opened its doors. It is designated as a city, state and national historic landmark and was one of the 100 most endangered sites of the World Monuments Fund.

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