

Killer Plants in the South-West

October 2005

Many carnivorous plants can be found in and around Hamilton. They may not be as spectacular as the Venus Fly-trap or Pitcher Plants but they just as certainly turn the tables on the usual “animal-eats-plant” story.

Carnivorous plants belong to two quite different groups – Sundews (*Drosera*) and Bladderworts. This article will concentrate only on the sundews. Sundews are quite common and can be found in many native grassland remnants, on nature strips as well as in most kinds of bushland.

The **Pale Sundew** is the most likely to be seen in flower at this time of the year. Standing up to 20 cm tall it consists of a thin stem supporting several circular leaves and crowned with a white or pink flower. In common with other sundews, the leaves are ringed by long tentacle-like hairs each tipped with a drop of shiny, sticky liquid.

Even on the warmest days, after the real dew has long since evaporated, these droplets glitter like tiny jewels. Unsuspecting insects, perhaps expecting a thirst quenching sip of dew, land on these leaves and find themselves trapped in the sticky liquid. Their struggles cause the hairs to bend over and move the unfortunate captive towards the centre of the leaf. Digestive juices are then released by the plant and the insect is converted to plant food over the next few days.

After the insect has been consumed the leaf goes back to its original shape but without the sticky liquid. This allows the undigested parts of the meal to fall away.

The **Scented Sundew**, another common species, has a rosette of ground-hugging green or red spoon-shaped leaves and produces a single flower about the size of a ten cent coin. To fully appreciate the scent of this aptly named plant you will have to adopt what some might see as an undignified “knees on the ground, tail in the air” position. It is worth it. If you have a magnifying lens, a close look at the structure of the leaf is also rewarding.

In researching this article we came across a sundew with several small green and brown beetles climbing around it. Further investigation revealed that these beetles can walk on the leaves without triggering the enshrouding hairs and that they scavenge the captured prey of the plant. It is difficult to know whether the plant gets a benefit from these insect lodgers.

An ironic comment on this interaction between plant and insect is that sundew flowers depends on insects for their pollination. Hardly seems fair does it?

Photos below (from left):

Drosera macrantha (Climbing Sundew leaves)

Drosera whittakeri (Scented Sundews in moss at Troopers Ck, Grampians).

