

BOOK REVIEW

D'Amato, P. 2013. *The Savage Garden: Cultivating Carnivorous Plants* (revised). Softcover, 374 + x pp., approximately 290 figures, most in color, 15cm x 23 cm (6" x 9"). ISBN: 978-1-60774-410-8. Ten Speed Press. \$25.99, signed copies from californiacarnivores.com.

Reviewed by Barry Rice

For the attention-deficit crowd out there, here is your review—Buy the book; you'll need it. For you, for a family member, for a friend. For whomever wants to grow carnivorous plants.

As for those whom would like to know more, here are some details...

In 1998, Peter D'Amato published "The Savage Garden." The importance of that book for carnivorous plant horticulturists cannot be overstated. At that time, nearly all the carnivorous plant books were either technical treatments or focused on the plants in the wild. Adrian Slack's books were dedicated to horticulture, but having been published in 1979 and 1986, were woefully dated. Years of growing (and killing) carnivorous plants had earned us hard-won lessons on how to do things right—or at least better. But unless you had complete sets of issues of all the journals of the various carnivorous plant societies, as well as electronic files storing all the chatter on the Internet, there was no way to review the best-practices in carnivorous plant growing.

Peter's¹ first book filled that void. He presented an excellent summary of what we all had learned about growing carnivorous plants. The critical information was all in one place, for easy capture and digestion.

But that was fifteen years ago. Once again, we need a new reference book on carnivorous plant growing. Indeed, so much of what we know about carnivorous plants has changed that in some ways it is almost a new hobby. For example, the numbers of species, hybrids, and cultivars have exploded! *The Savage Garden* had become dated.

Happily, Peter has come forth with a major revision of his first book. Similar in format to the first, it is about 20% bigger, and of course, loaded with current information. So yes, even if you have a copy of his first book (and really, who doesn't?), you absolutely must get this new version.

So what is in the book?

There are no big surprises—the book begins with a dozen introductory pages, and then follows with 60 pages of cultivation nuts and bolts—soil mixes, light, water, dormancy, growing methods, etc. Everything is covered in detail—it's all there. And then, in 275 nitrogen-rich pages, Peter describes in gory detail just about all we know about carnivorous plant cultivation. Finally, he concludes with a dozen pages on other resources. Lovely illustrations are found on nearly every page.

Peter's writing is smooth and easy. He knows his way around the English language, and there's not a stilted sentence to be found. Also, you will find plenty of Peterisms, by which I mean strangely evocative phrases that remind us that investing so much energy into growing plants because they are carnivorous, is well, kind of kooky:

"Mother Nature hopefully had psychiatric care after she designed the sundews."

"This is the plant made famous by Charles Darwin's tireless and hideous experiments on it."

"The unhappy face of a grasshopper as it is digested alive."

"...*Nepenthes lowii*, a true crapivorous plant!"

¹As I review this work, I will make no attempt to hide the fact that Peter D'Amato and I are good friends, hence my addressing him as "Peter." However, I maintain that my review is impartial, and that I have no personal financial interest in the sales of his books.

I can imagine Peter gently cackling as wrote these lines. So many of us, who have been involved in carnivorous plants for decades, have grown complacent about these astonishing plants. Not Peter—even after all these years, he obviously finds new delights in their strange and sinister habits. He reminds you of why we love these plants.

Of course, everyone expects a reviewer to throw some mud at the work. So let me do my best. The Savage Garden is not a compendium of all knowledge. For example, those interested in abandoning old school moss-and-pots horticulture for tissue culture will find almost no guidance on *in vitro* methods. Also, the developing and rapidly changing technology of LEDs, in the context of growing carnivorous plants, is barely mentioned. Beyond that, his work is generally complete.

Also, if I wear my scientist hat while reading this book, I can find a few things to complain about. While Peter gets most of his science right, the occasional misstep finds its way into the text. For example, when discussing *Darlingtonia*, he notes that only one population occurs in the Sierra Nevada, when in fact this mountain range is home to three well-known populations in two counties (while I know of more than 18 sites, grouped in seven clusters, in Plumas, Nevada, and Sierra counties). But really, it would be a poor choice for anyone to turn to a horticultural book as a reference work on scientific minutia, just as one would not turn to a scientific paper for solid hints on cultivation. Remember the book's parallel title is "Cultivating Carnivorous Plants." Peter's science, in regards to cultivation, is robust.

Indeed, I would argue that Peter keeps up with science very well, for examples he includes Robert Gibson's recent new findings on the *Drosera peltata* group, myriad new species of *Nepenthes* and other genera, and so on. Do I agree with all his taxonomy? No, but they are scientifically defensible.

One final topic that is pleasing to see. For the last decade, carnivorous plant horticulturists have been frustrated by the horticultural code for cultivars. In particular, horticulturists would like to use the system of greges (greges). Alas, the use of greges is only available to orchid growers. No matter how often I have tried to explain that this ruling was made by the International Commission for the Nomenclature of Cultivated Plants, people have continued to blame the International Carnivorous Plant Society for this restriction. Peter gets his facts right here, and in fact argues for the rogue adoption of greges by carnivorous plant horticulturists. This is probably a good thing—after all, there will be no change in the *status quo* system if everyone appears to be satisfied with it, when in fact it is frustrating to so many.

So here is my prescription, and it is simple. Buy the book. In fact, you should buy the book directly from the California Carnivores web site, because you can request to have it be autographed to you.

There's not a whole lot better than having a great book, signed by the author, directly to you. You have your marching orders. Now go.