



Beware the people-eating plants?

By Arthur O. Tucker

Dover High School recently performed "Little Shop of Horrors." I still like the original black and white movie (1960) with a young Jack Nicholson as the sadistic dentist.

Fortunately, our children had a friendly dentist, so their dental health did not suffer. However, for days afterwards, until the novelty wore off, they mimicked the plant with a taste for blood, Audrey II, by repeating "Feed Me! Feed Me!" when they were hungry.

I also remember movies with similar themes, such as "Invasion of the Body Snatchers" (1956), "The Woman Eater" (1957), "The Day of the Triffids" (1962), "Please Don't Eat My Mother" (1973), "Attack of the Killer Tomatoes" (1978). After viewing one of these, a carnivorous friend asked "I wonder if these plants prefer vegans ... you know, to get justice for saphshed (his vegetable version of bloodshed)?"

This is one of those "imponderables" with no answers that circulate on e-mails, as people-eating plants don't really exist (except in fantasy).

The largest animals captured and "eaten" by plants are from unconfirmed reports of the giant pitcher plant of Southeast Asia, Nepenthes. Supposedly small mice will go into the pitchers at night to escape the cold and accidentally drown.

Unconfirmed or not, insects

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are the primary food of these plants, not mice. If mice were the preferred diet, I think that giant pitcher plants would be in many homes today! Who could resist a green mousetrap that you don't have to empty or clean?

Probably these stories about people-eating plants can be dated from a report in 1881 in the "South Australian Register," in which a traveler recounted a tribe in Madagascar sacrificing victims to a tree. This was given further notoriety in 1924 by the former governor of Michigan Chase Osborn in his book "Madagascar, Land of the Man-eating Tree." Similar legends have arisen in South America, Mexico, and elsewhere.

My favorite was from one of the supermarket checkout tabloids in 1987. "Houseplant horror!" told the tragedy of poor Isabel Suarez Delgado, a 51-year old woman in Venezuela who, as the byline said, was "eaten by killer blossoms after she falls into flower bed." And then there is the e-news circulating today about a "cow-eating" tree in Padrame, India. Wonderful fantasy stories without an iota of truth!

Editor's note: On the campus of Delaware State University, the Claude E. Phillips Herbarium is Delaware's center for research, education, and outreach about plant identifications, locations,



Delaware State News/Katie Kazimir Seymour, played by Conor McGiffin, is about to feed Audrey, played by Jessica Hurd, to the ever-growing man-eating plant Audrey II in a scene from "Little Shop of Horrors." The play was staged at Dover High last weekend.

and uses. Call 857-6452 (Dr. Susan Yost) to arrange a tour of the Herbarium, and call 857-6408 (Dr. Arthur Tucker) for more information about this article.