

More Killers – the Bladderworts

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Sundews, the plants that catch and digest insects were the subject of an earlier article. The other carnivorous plants to be found in our district are called **bladderworts**. This unfortunate term, sounding more like a health complaint than a suitable name for small, delicate plants is, nonetheless quite descriptive. Many people know them by the more romantic name of **Fairies' Aprons**.

Like the Sundews these plants are always found growing in and around wet places. The Fairies Aprons have a single slender stalk up to 20cm surmounted by a complicated two part flower, the most striking feature of which is the semi-circular bottom lip which sticks out like a tiny brightly coloured skirt. The flower is about 20mm wide and is usually a deep lilac or purple with a yellow centre, though completely yellow ones can also be found.

A much smaller relative of the Fairies Aprons is the **Pink Fan**. This little gem stands no taller than 15cm and has tiny pink flowers, 4-6mm wide with the apron divided into three separate lobes or fingers. As with all small plants and animals the wonderful detail can only be fully appreciated when viewed through a magnifying lens.

These plants have a simple root system but have a complicated arrangement of underground leaves. These leaves form tiny hollow bladders partly filled with water. At one end of the bladder is a small trapdoor which, if triggered by a small aquatic creature, swings open at the same time as the bladder increases in size, causing water to rush in carrying the animal with it. Mosquito larvae, waterfleas and small aquatic worms are some of the prey caught in this way.

These carnivorous plants always grow in soils that are poor in nitrogen. This element usually comes from decaying vegetation. In acidic swampy situations there is rarely enough oxygen in the soil to assist with this breakdown. Animal bodies contain proteins, which are nitrogen rich compounds. Sundews and bladderworts have each evolved different ways of making use of this plentiful source of an essential nutrient.

Photos below (from left):

Utricularia roots

Pink Fans flowers (*Utricularia tenella*)

Fairies' Apron flowers (*Utricularia beaugleholeii*)

