



ST PHOTOS: ALAN LIM

PRETTY INSECT-EATERS: Science teacher Cindy Ng's more than 100 pots of carnivorous plants such as pitcher plants and Venus fly traps make a pretty sight in her balcony.

Pitcher plants on show

WHEN visitors to London's world-famous annual Chelsea Flower Show stop by the plant display set up by pitcher plant specialists Borneo Exotics, they are usually awe-struck.

"The fascination factor is high," says Briton Robert Cantley (below left), 49, who is managing director of the Sri Lanka-based firm that has been exhibiting at the show for the last three years.

Its display at last year's show won a coveted gold medal – and no wonder. Sinister-looking, carnivorous pitcher plants of varying colours such as greens, reds and dark browns nestled among moss in a jungle-like environment.

Mr Cantley, together with Borneo Exotic director Diana Williams (below right), 54, are set to recreate a display at the upcoming Singapore Garden Festival (SGF) that will also wow visitors.

They will be competing in the Fantasy Gardens category at SGF, where the top prize is a gold medal.

They showcased a small selection of pitcher plants at the first SGF in 2006, and are now back with a bigger display.

Borneo Exotics is the world's leading nursery for the tropical



pitcher plants and was started by Mr Cantley, a former engineer, 11 years ago. It not only sells pitcher plants around the world, but also conserves the endangered species by cultivating them.

The biggest pitcher plant it has in the nursery in Sri Lanka is the black *Nepenthes truncata*, which has pitchers that are about 30cm long, compared to the usual 8 to 15cm.

For their SGF display, all the pitcher plants will be flown in from Sri Lanka. Each pitcher will be individually bubble-wrapped before being packed in a foam box for the 3½-hour flight to Singapore.

"This will ensure that each plant is in top form and ready to be unveiled to visitors," says Ms Williams.

➤ The Singapore Garden Festival is on at the Suntec Convention Centre from July 25 to Aug 1, 10am to 10pm. Tickets are at \$6 (weekday) and \$12 (weekend) for adults, and \$3 (weekday) and \$6 (weekend) for children, students and senior citizens. Family tickets for two adults and three children cost \$18 (weekday) and \$36 (weekend). They are on sale at the Singapore Botanic Gardens and on www.singaporegardenfestival.com

PITCHER PERFECT

Fans of camivorous plants love them for their pretty looks and insect-trapping ability

Tay Suan Chiang

THE balcony in teacher Cindy Ng's five-room HDB flat at Telok Blangah Crescent is a pretty sight to behold but a nightmare for insects.

It is filled with more than 100 pots of carnivorous plants, such as pitcher plants, sundews, butterworts and the famed Venus fly traps. Carnivorous plants are so called because they feed on insects.

And, yes, even though she lives on the 14th floor, her plants have trapped insects.

The 35-year-old primary school science teacher has been growing them for the last nine years. To ensure that her plants grow well, she installed a misting system in the balcony and uses fluorescent lighting to simulate sunlight and encourage healthy growth.

Mrs Ng, who has no children, says she likes Venus fly traps because of their ability to trap insects. "It's

fascinating to watch the movement of the fly traps," she says.

As for pitcher plants, she is attracted to them because of their large variety. Some of hers are so tiny, the pitchers are the size of a thumbnail, while others are about 10cm long.

Her collection even drew pitcher plant specialists Robert Cantley and Diana Williams from award-winning Sri Lanka-based Borneo Exotics to her flat last year. She recalls that Ms Williams praised her for regularly pruning her pitcher plants.

Borneo Exotics will have a display at the upcoming Singapore Garden Festival in July. Visitors will be able to see the largest specimen of pitcher plants ever exhibited in Singapore. (See other story)

While other greenery and flora such as money plants and orchids are hot favourites with Singaporeans, an increasing number are also growing carnivorous plants.

A sales manager at World Farm nursery, Mr Lee Meng Kwan, says they are especially popular with parents as gifts for their kids. "Carnivorous plants like the Venus fly trap are educational tools to teach kids how plants eat," he says.

Mr Phillippe Noor, 28, is another fan of carnivorous plants. The student, who lives in a four-bedroom apartment at Bukit Gombak, has converted one bedroom into a "cool room" for his plants.

He grows highland pitcher plants that require a cool environment. His air-conditioning is switched on all day and the temperature is set at 16 deg C. He says the electricity bill is probably in the "three-digits" range.

As the bedroom is insect-free, the pitcher plants are unable to trap insects, so they are occasionally fed crickets.

For Mr Sandy Soh, it is the carnivorous plants' ability to capture insects that attracted him. The 33-year-old, who runs a pet service business, has been growing a variety of pitcher plants, Venus fly traps and sundews at his Bukit Batok semi-detached home for the past two years.

Like Mrs Ng, he has also specially installed fluorescent lighting in his living room for his sundews. He says of his plants: "They're not only pretty to look at but are also good for trapping mosquitoes."

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KILLER DEW: The glistening drops on the sundew are sticky substances that trap and kill insects by enveloping them.

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Growing carnivorous plants

Pitcher plant (right)

\$32, from World Farm, 15 Bah Soon Pah Road

Yummy: The 120-plus species of pitcher plants all trap prey the same way.

Pitchers release a sweet, scented nectar that attracts insects which then fall into the pitchers and drown – slippery sides prevent them from climbing out – in a fluid containing enzymes, and are then dissolved.

Depending on size, the plants are known to “eat” frogs and rats, too.

Care: The plants like bright light but not direct sunlight. The soil or sphagnum moss that they are grown in should be well-drained.

Don't allow pitchers to dry out. When you get home with a pitcher plant from the nursery, fill a third of the pitcher with water to ensure the plant gets enough water to start with. Subsequently, water every few days.



hapless insect, lured into the folds by sweet-smelling nectar, lands on them, snap! – they close in a trap.

The plant then exudes an enzyme which “dissolves” the insect, turning it into a digestible dinner. The fly trap reopens after a few days.

Care: Grow the plants in very bright light but not under direct sun. They do well in a warm, humid environment with a constant supply of moisture.

Watering them from the top will cause them to rot. Instead, soak them in a plate of water for 10 minutes, then discard the water. Repeat every two to three days.

Butterwort (right)

\$10, from World Farm

Yummy: The leaves resemble mini cabbages and even look cute, but don't be fooled.

The greasy leaves are covered with tiny hairs. At the end of each is a gland that produces a clear, sticky substance that traps insects. The leaves then release enzymes and acids that dissolve the prey.

Care: Grow them in a cool area with bright, indirect sunlight. They require wet conditions, so make sure they don't dry out.



Venus fly trap (below)

\$10, from World Farm

Yummy: They may look like petals, but once a



Sundew (main picture)

Rarely found in nurseries but available through members of the Green Culture Singapore (www.greenculturesg.com)

Yummy: They get their name from glistening, sticky drops like morning dew on their tentacles. While pretty to look at, they are death to insects, which will get stuck. They die after struggling to escape, or from a lack of oxygen as the sticky liquid envelops them. Enzymes then dissolve them.

Care: Grow them in direct or slightly filtered sunlight, in a mix of sphagnum moss, peat moss and a little perlite (or coarse builders sand) to keep it from compacting. Keep the medium moist.