

Appalachia

Volume 77
Number 1 *Winter/Spring 2026: Healing and
Hazards*

Article 14

2025

Splinter Hill: Looking Into the Maws of Pitcher Plants

Samantha Sapp

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.dartmouth.edu/appalachia>



Part of the [Nonfiction Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Sapp, Samantha (2025) "Splinter Hill: Looking Into the Maws of Pitcher Plants," *Appalachia*: Vol. 77: No. 1, Article 14.

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.dartmouth.edu/appalachia/vol77/iss1/14>

This In This Issue is brought to you for free and open access by Dartmouth Digital Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in Appalachia by an authorized editor of Dartmouth Digital Commons. For more information, please contact dartmouthdigitalcommons@groups.dartmouth.edu.

Splinter Hill

Looking into the maws of pitcher plants

Samantha Sapp



SOMETIMES THE SOUL OF OUR LAND IS UNDERFOOT AND WE DON'T know it.

It was late summer in a remote pocket of southeast Alabama, not far from the border of my home state, Florida. Down here, summers are brutal—even the trees sag and sweat in the heat. Still, my fiancée and I had trekked deep into the woods to find the bog at Splinter Hill.

Bogs are hardly exotic. When tourists flock to the beach with the rhythms of spring and summer break, they bypass the bogs entirely, unable to see past the swarms of flies and fetid stench of death. But on the Gulf Coast, bogs are havens for the only genus of pitcher plants in North America, *Sarracenia*. Of its eleven species, ten can be found in Alabama and Florida. Only one can be found outside the South.

For pitcher plants, this is their homeland.

This particular bog was dominated by a sea of *Sarracenia leucophylla*. Standing waist-high, they rose as bright green shoots topped with white pitchers—except the white of their skin was crisscrossed by blood-red veins. Above the pitchers were leaves curved like sea foam, which had translucent spots that mocked trapped flies with a glimpse of the sky above. Behind them was a wall of *Sarracenia purpurea* in full bloom, wilted stars of violet that rose a full foot above their cousins.

The bog was well preserved, bought specifically by The Nature Conservancy to be safe from human hands. Which was why I was slightly horrified when my fiancée, a plant biologist, reached out to touch them.

Seeing my reaction, she laughed and shook her head. “I’ll be gentle. Just trust me and look.”

With precise fingers, she lifted the curved leaf above the pitcher. Squeamishly, I leaned over. Inside the pitcher was a pit of broken bodies dissolving into food—a mass grave in a sea of mass graves. One fly near the top twitched, stuck to the corpses of its friends, unable to escape, forced to watch the slow churn of the sun above as it died.

To glimpse inside a pitcher plant is to stare into the maw of death.

“They’ve evolved to survive off these flies,” she explained. “In bogs like this, the soil is terrible for plants. It’s nutrient-poor and acidic, so they adapted by looking for food outside of the soil. Now, look above.”

One of North America's few fly-eating plants, Sarracenia leucophylla. A bog is perfect for it. STEPHANIE BRUNDAGE/LADY BIRD JOHNSON WILDFLOWER CENTER

I craned my neck and was met with the sun and sky, both bright and burning.

“Since the soil is poor, trees can’t grow here either. The overstory is clear, so the pitcher plants have no direct competition. This place is perfect for them, and they are perfect for it.”

MY FAMILY IS JUST AS INTERTWINED WITH THE LAND HERE AS THE PITCHER plants. For two centuries, family members have lived where the Florida and Alabama state lines converge, but growing up I’d never heard a whisper about pitcher plants. Never seen one, until I sought them out.

Later that day, I stopped to visit my grandpa. His place is what I’ve always considered home, an old ranch home he half-built himself, near the end of a country road—except in Florida, nothing stays country for long, and now the road is flanked by subdivisions instead of the longleaf pine forest I remember.

My grandpa is a gruff man as weathered as the land itself. His father was friends with Hank Williams, and my grandpa was a musician until he quit to work at the local Monsanto plant. He spent his youth fishing and exploring the bayous, and he’s always armed—sometimes, when you hug him, you can feel the gun on his hip digging into yours. Still, when I came out as a queer woman and announced my engagement, he was one of the first people to support me. Over time, that support has slowly rippled through the rest of my family.

Most days, he sits on the screen porch he built, smokes a cigarette, and watches the birds. When I went over that day, we did just that and I gushed about the pitcher plants.

“We have them here, too,” he told me. “Used to be more, but there should still be some down near where the road bends. They’re building some new houses there, but the plants are supposed to be protected.”

Afterward, I went to where the road bent. I saw the houses under construction, half-built skeletons with borrowed ribs in the image of every other new house in Florida. But there were no pitcher plants.

Those last ones were gone, too.

YOU GET USED TO HEARING THIS STORY. INDIGO SNAKES, GOPHER TORTOISES, pitcher plants—they used to be more common in the Panhandle. But this isn’t just a story about Florida, or Alabama, or the South. This is the ecological story of America, and it’s no surprise when you consider our relationship with land.

Land is a commodity, and its value is measured in two main ways: the value of the resources on it and the convenience of its location for people. In the Midwest, the soil's value for farming is so high that almost all the native prairie has been razed for cash crops. In cities across the country, land in exurbs-turned-suburbs sells for high prices, regardless of what is on it.

But in Florida, for generations the land had little value, so our pine forests were harvested *en masse* for cheap pulp and low-grade timber, southern yellow pine—the same wood my fiancée and I used to build our bed. Our swamps were drained to make room for cattle grazing, even though it's too hot here for adult cattle—instead, we raised the nation's young and shipped them away for the liminal period between adulthood and slaughter.

Now, things are different. We take the nation's old for the liminal period between adulthood and death, and land sells for a premium as long as a home can be built on it. Our beaches are dominated by luxury hotels and high-rises, and our seafood is harvested for out-of-state elites. The few delicate ecosystems that were once spared are now destroyed by human hands at horrifying rates.

Broadly, land in America is treated as if it has no worth beyond its use to us. We treat it like an object because we see it as a collection of objects—of dirt, rocks, trees, and hills. We treat it as property, complete with the right of *jus abutendi*—the right to abuse or destroy. It doesn't matter if you rip up saw palms, or build your house on the home of a tortoise. It's your land, so you do as you please. What feeble laws we have to protect it are easily violated.

My family understands it this way, too. The first thing my father did when he moved into his current home was cut down the trees he didn't like. The southern magnolia out front, which had giant waxy leaves and blooms of curled white petals, was the first to go.

"The leaves are too big," he told me. "Messes with the lawn mower."

And like that, a tree older than him was gone.

MY FATHER WAS IN THE MILITARY, SO I WASN'T RAISED ENTIRELY IN THE SOUTH or with the same view of the land. Instead, I was born in Japan and spent much of my adolescence there. If America was where I first understood the wild, Japan was where I first came to love it. As a teenager I spent days hiking in whispering forests of bamboo (*madake* マダケ) that towered so high above me they dwarfed the sky. When they bent with the wind, it was like the world bent with them. I spent nights sleeping under the shelter of what we called Japanese redwoods (*sugi* 杉), perilously close to the rutting of

wild boar (*inoshishi* イノシシ). Even a decade later, often my heart expects to see the nature of my youth outside.

In Japan, there is a different cultural knowledge of land and nature. Traditionally, it has been sacred—in traditional belief, Shinto (神道), distinctive trees, rocks, and other aspects of nature have spirits of their own, called *kami* (神). And even though the relationship between contemporary Japanese culture and Shinto is complex and ever-changing, the respect for nature persists. To litter is taboo; when I lived there, public trash cans were rare because your waste was your responsibility. And despite the density of most metro areas, parks are abundant.

In the heart of Tokyo, there is a vast forest around the Meiji Shrine (明治神宮) planted a century ago, large enough that my family spent hours wandering it. But though the trees were planted by human hands, the forest has been untouched since—it is considered sacred, so it is endowed with the same liberty we have. Trees that return to the earth remain where they fall. Animals are welcome to come and leave as they please. The forest and its habitants have a sanctity that is not to be violated.

Growing up, this was how I learned to understand the world. All living things branch from the same tree of life, so the same spirit of life flows through us all. Although humanity may have knowledge other beings cannot have, other beings also have knowledge we cannot have. As Henry Beston, an American naturalist and writer wrote, animals “move finished and complete, gifted with extensions of the senses we have lost or never attained. . . . they are not underlings; they are other nations, caught with ourselves in the net of life and time. . . .” Other beings are not objects or property, but rather a radically different expression of what it means to be alive.

But perhaps it is not just living things that can hold their own identity and spirit, because like us, mountains are born and grow over time, until they fade and eventually disappear into the fabric of the world. Like us, they have a home and faces of their own. Like us, they are a world of their own; just as countless animals and shrubs may live on a mountain, trillions of microorganisms live inside us. We are composed of the same elements and the same atoms.

We are more alike than unlike, and that is true for everything in this world.

IN THAT MOMENT, STARING INTO THE MAW OF A PITCHER PLANT, I REALIZED that to understand *Sarracenia* is to understand the wild South. Resilience

and desperation enough to thrive even in the harshest soils. Heat, humidity, and violence. The cruelty and beauty of competition inside what some conservationists call America's Amazon. *Sarracenia* are the soul of the land, sacred. And not just them—so is the humble gopher tortoise, who tunnels burrows into the sandy soil so that indigo snakes and other creatures can have a home, too. So are the bayous, with brackish waters that curl lazily through the land, inadvertently creating a biome like no other in the world. Everything comes together to form a greater gestalt.

In Ohio, where I've sojourned the last several years, I can sense the soul of the land in the spring ephemerals, wildflowers such as trilliums that bloom in beauty for a brief moment while the earth is waking from winter. I can sense it in the migratory birds, in the grackles that made their nest in my gutter this summer. I can even sense it in the deer that traipse through town and eat whole stems off my tomato plants.

This world we live in is sacred.

It's not just the mountains, plants, and animals, either. It's us, too. We are an integral part of the tapestry of life, fiber woven inextricably with the trees and boar and mountains and everything else on this earth. Fiber that, if it were to unravel, could sever each connecting thread until there is a deep gouge in the tree of life.

We are endowed with both custodial power and ignorance. We have a responsibility to the world around us, even as we are ill-equipped to fulfill that responsibility. So, perhaps it comes to us to create spaces such as the forest around the Meiji Shrine—ecosystems born of human hands, but safe from further interference by those same hands.

Now, when I look at the sketch of *SARRACENIA LEUCOPHYLLA* that hangs on my living room wall, I don't just think of pitcher plants, or even the South.



Samantha Sapp. COURTESY OF THE AUTHOR

I think of my grandfather, worn from exploring the frontiers of the land, clinging to the edges of what everyone else thought was too far. My father, apathetic to the destruction he brought and the mass grave of trees rotting outside his house. My then fiancée and now wife, heart-achingly beautiful and different from anyone else I've ever met. Myself, forced to grow in soil too acidic for anyone else, too queer to blend into the rest of the Deep South. The bog at Splinter Hill didn't just help me understand my home—it helped me understand my family and myself.

That same summer, my wife and I were married at the courthouse in Birmingham, Alabama. We both wore white, and I wore a dress with webs of lace.

I looked just like *Sarracenia leucophylla*.

SAMANTHA SAPP is a writer and former middle school teacher. Though she is originally from the Florida Panhandle, she has spent the last few years in the Midwest coping poorly with winter. Her writing has appeared or is forthcoming in several literary journals, including *Sinister Wisdom* and *Mount Hope Magazine*.

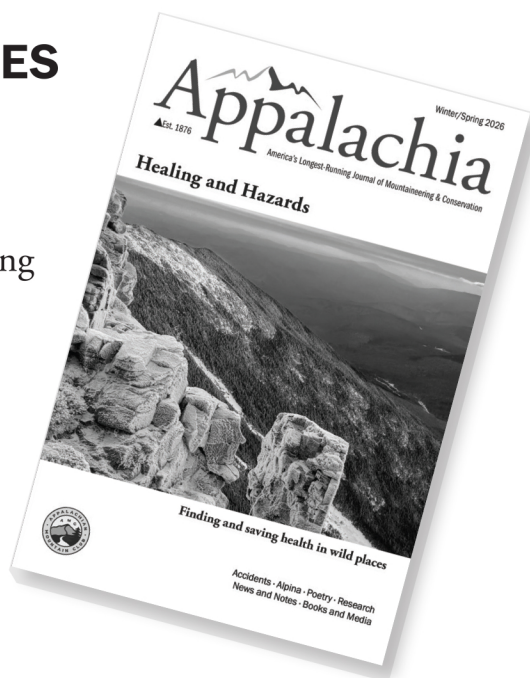
Editor's note: This essay was a runner-up in the Waterman Fund Essay Contest in 2024.

"I started reading Appalachia for the accident reports, but I kept reading for the great features."—Mohamed Ellozy, subscriber

SUPPORT THE STORIES YOU LOVE!

Start or renew your *Appalachia* subscription today, and keep reading America's longest-running journal of mountaineering and conservation.

Visit **outdoors.org/appalachia** for a special offer: 36% off the journal's cover price. That's three years of *Appalachia* (6 issues) for only \$42. Or choose a one-year subscription (2 issues) for \$18—18% off the cover price.



Inside every issue, you'll find:

- inspired writing on mountain exploration, adventurers, ecology, and conservation
- up-to-date news and notes on international expeditions
- analysis of recent Northeastern mountaineering accidents
- book reviews, poetry, and much more

Subscribe today at **outdoors.org/appalachia** or call **603-466-2727**



**APPALACHIAN
MOUNTAIN CLUB**
SINCE 1876

Subscription prices valid as of October 2025. Prices and offers subject to change without notice. For the most up-to-date information, visit outdoors.org.