

CRIMINAL



Episode 5: Dropping Like Flies

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[Footsteps.]

Brandon Dean: They're all different. Some, when you catch them, hey, they throw their hands up, and you got them. But it is kind of an eerie feeling when you're out here by yourself and you're dealing with four or five guys and three or four of them's carrying machetes, because that's a common tool of the trade, the machetes. You've got to be careful. I mean, it's not a game. You've got to be on your P's and Q's, and no situation's the same. So you've got to expect the unexpected.

Phoebe Judge: Brandon Dean is an officer with the North Carolina Wildlife Resources Commission, the state nature cops. Dean patrols the Green Swamp, more than 17,000 acres of savanna and swampland in the southeastern most corner of the state. It's known mostly for its bird watching and longleaf pines, but it's also ground zero for an obscure black market, one that's exploded in the last few years and shows no sign of slowing down.

Brandon Dean: So you walk up. You wouldn't even notice it. See them?

Eric Mennel: Oh, wow.

Brandon Dean: That's what they would dig up right there and sell.

Eric Mennel: They're so small. It's like a fingernail.

Brandon Dean: Yeah, those are really small. Like I said, some of them, you can get... [Fades out.]

Phoebe Judge: That's because the Green Swamp is one of the only places in the world where you can find an especially rare plant, one that's disappearing by the thousands: the Venus flytrap.

Brandon Dean: Obviously, this place here has been hit pretty hard, because used to, you could come out here and they'd be everywhere. And now we're scrounging to find a couple.

Eric Mennel: You could get so many.

Brandon Dean: Yes.

Phoebe Judge: Every year for the past few years, tens of thousands of flytraps have gone missing — from the wild, from gardens, from nurseries — decimating the population. And really, nobody knows where they go. What's cropped up in rural North Carolina is essentially a Venus flytrap crime ring with lackeys, middlemen, and a mysterious end buyer who's perpetuating the market. Our producer, Eric Mennel, decided to look into this black market to try to figure out who's running it, who's funding it, and why. He has today's story. I'm Phoebe Judge, and this is Criminal.

[Music.]

Eric Mennel: Could you just sort of describe, when you first walked in, what the scene looked like?

Cindy Evans: Like a hurricane had hit. It was pots everywhere.

Eric Mennel: Cindy Evans and Joe Wood run a nursery and craft business in Brunswick County, North Carolina, called Flytrap Farm. It's about ten miles south of the Green Swamp. Flytrap Farm, as you might've guessed, specializes in the bulk sale of Venus flytraps. One night last September, a group of people broke into Joe and Cindy's greenhouses.

Cindy Evans: What they did was pull the plants out of the pots. They didn't take the pots. They just pulled the plants out, put them in our bags that they had come in here, broke in-

Joe Wood: Our trash bags.

Cindy Evans: ... and, yeah, stolen our trash bags.

Joe Wood: All the windows out back here, and they took them all out and laid them on the ground on pieces of cardboard so they wouldn't break.

Eric Mennel: Cindy pulled her iPhone and swiped through picture after picture of the scene, footprints and the spilled soil, tire marks in the field behind the greenhouses.

Cindy Evans: This is where they came in. This is where they broke out the back of that greenhouse there all the way in the back.

Eric Mennel: How many plants are we talking?

Cindy Evans: What Audrey counted up was about \$65,000 worth.

Eric Mennel: About 18,000 plants in total, the vast majority of which were Venus flytraps. As far as anyone I've talked to can tell, it's the largest single theft of flytraps ever.

Cindy Evans: It totally shot our whole fall and early spring shipping schedule. We're so behind right now.

Joe Wood: Not only behind, we're way in debt again, too, because we borrowed money, borrowed money, borrowed money trying to get things caught back up. It set us back 15 years, just like when we started.

Eric Mennel: Why would they do that?

Joe Wood: Because there's a black market for them.

[Music.]

Angie Carl: You tell people what grows here, and they're like, "I thought it grew in the Amazon rainforest."

Eric Mennel: Angie Carl works for the Nature Conservancy, the non-profit that owns most of the Green Swamp.

Angie Carl: I say I'm a paid arsonist.

Eric Mennel: She does controlled burns to keep the plant growth in check. I met her not far from the Green Swamp in Wilmington, North Carolina, aka flytrap central. This part of the state is literally the only place in the world where Venus flytraps grow in the wild. There's a park nearby called Flytrap Downs and a Flytrap 5K run every year.

Angie Carl: You can't come down here and not be exposed to the flytrap, but it only grows within a 90-mile radius of Wilmington, North Carolina. Yeah, it's a pretty incredible species.

Eric Mennel: It is pretty incredible, but likely not for the reasons you think. First off, and let's just get this reference out of the way, it does not look anything like the plant from Little Shop of Horrors.

[Clip from the movie.]

Audrey II: Feed me now.

Seymour: I can't.

Audrey II: Must be blood.

Seymour: Twoey, that's disgusting.

Audrey II: Must be fresh.

[End of movie clip.]

Cindy Evans: People think that they're huge plants that can eat people, and they can eat your mother-in-law if you've got a good blender. That's the only ... [Laughing.]

Joe Wood: You've got to mulch them up.

Cindy Evans: You've got to mulch them good.

Eric Mennel: Again, Cindy and Joe at Flytrap Farm. The biggest flytraps only get to be about four or five inches tall, but that doesn't make them any less impressive.

BBC One Narrator: The Venus flytrap.

Eric Mennel: This BBC One documentary is basically flytrap porn. The plants are tiny, green. The inside of the actual trap is usually a bright red, which makes them highly visible to insects.

BBC One Narrator: It makes itself very attractive, oozing nectar across the brim of each leaf.

Eric Mennel: Now, this might be silly to point out, but the flytrap doesn't actually know there's a bug in the trap, because, as Angie Carl had to remind me ...

Angie Carl: Plants don't have brains.

Eric Mennel: What they do have is a series of trigger hairs, almost like whiskers. Think of it like a mouse trap, where it's always in this suspended state of tension until something comes along and taps the trigger hair. The insect can hit one of those trigger hairs and be totally fine. But ...

BBC One Narrator: But a timer has been set.

Angie Carl: Two of those trigger hairs are touched really quickly in succession, the snap closes shut.

BBC One Narrator: The fly is doomed.

Eric Mennel: It's likely flytraps were all over this part of North Carolina 100 years ago, but, like with other plants and animals, development did a number on the population. And what's left has been relegated to a few protected preserves. And for years, that was fine. Nothing to be concerned about. People knew about the plant, but it was sort of a novelty — until the last few years, when something in the market shifted. Somebody, somewhere, has increased their demand for flytraps, and it's causing all sorts of problems.

[Music.]

Joe and Cindy at Flytrap Farm aren't the only victims of flytrap burglary, not by a long shot. Just a few months before the break-in, somebody dug up and stole an estimated \$20,000 worth of flytraps from a park in Wilmington. Joe and Cindy have all kinds of stories about thefts around town.

Cindy Evans: A friend of ours, his wife died a couple years ago, and they did a memorial garden for her. We brought a bunch of plants up there, and they planted them, and grew them. And they were expanding and doing very well. And then, all of a sudden, they came in and stole all them.

Joe Wood: Oh, they steal them all the time. But nobody's got that many flytraps for them to steal.

Eric Mennel: Even Flytrap Farm, at 18,000 plants, wasn't enough to satisfy the market. Plants are still disappearing, mostly from the biggest concentration of all: the Green Swamp.

Brandon Dean: It's almost impossible to catch them.

Eric Mennel: This is Brandon Dean again, the officer with the Wildlife Resources Commission.

Brandon Dean: They get dropped off, and like ghosts in the dark, you never know they're even there. They run across the road, get into the woods, and normal passer-by, they can't see them because of the savannas.

Eric Mennel: When people poach fly traps from the ground, they're on their hands and knees, below the grass line. But occasionally, Dean will be driving by and see a couple of heads pop up in the swamp, almost like prairie dogs. He'll hop out of his car, chase them down on foot, and, ideally, have them arrested and confiscate the traps.

Brandon Dean: I've gotten anywhere from 800 plants to over 2,000 plants. It all depends on how experienced the trapper is and what time of year it is and if they get into a good cluster of flytraps.

Eric Mennel: So when you catch these people, what do they have on their person? What are they carrying the flytraps in? How many are they carrying? What are they using to dig them up?

Brandon Dean: I've seen them carry flytraps from a pillowcase all the way to a backpack, whatever kind of satchel they can get to throw them in there. I've seen tools from spades you use in your garden to crowbars that are cut off to swing sets.

Eric Mennel: Swing sets?

Brandon Dean: Like the bar on a swing set. They'll break the bar off. It's probably half an inch diameter, flatten out the end to where it's flat. They've got a handle. They stick it in the ground and pop them right up.

Eric Mennel: Oh, that's kind of inventive.

Brandon Dean: Oh, yeah. Yes, they work harder at not working than they would if they had a job.

[Music.]

Eric Mennel: What time of day does this happen?

Brandon Dean: It depends on their schedule. Whenever they wake up. A lot of them, they already have charges pending, such as drug charges. So they don't have a job, so whenever they get the urge to go take flytraps, they get somebody to drop them off and they spend all day out here, digging traps.

Angie Carl: They're really hard to catch. We've put cameras out. They've stolen my cameras.

Eric Mennel: Again, Angie Carl with the Nature Conservancy.

Angie Carl: I think that they're marking areas. We'll go out and find spoons and stuff in areas.

Eric Mennel: Wait, so they're leaving spoons behind or they're leaving them there as a signal, like leaving breadcrumbs kind of thing?

Angie Carl: They leave them there so when they come back, they know where they were digging and they can move on from there.

Eric Mennel: In more ways than one, the culture of poachers is pretty similar to that of other black markets. For instance, it's every man for himself.

Angie Carl: We've had poachers call me and say, "I see poachers out in the savanna." And then two days later, that same person who called me gets arrested because they were out poaching. So they were calling in their competition.

Brandon Dean: There's other flytrappers that are jealous because they're on there, so quote, "turf." They call us and tell us they're out here doing it, and we come out here and track them up and find them.

Eric Mennel: Oh, it's literally like a turf war.

Brandon Dean: Oh, yeah. The other flytrappers call on other flytrappers. They'll tell you, say, "I've been in there. This is where they're going to go. This is the time of day they're going to do it." I mean, you have to go, because you don't know when they're going to be picked up and when they're not. Pretty comical, if you think about it.

Eric Mennel: Admittedly, it's hard not to laugh a little at the idea of a Venus flytrap crime ring. But in the last three years, things have gotten really bad. The flytrap has some federal and state protections, but there's just not enough information to actually call it threatened or endangered. And this is one of the most frustrating parts of this story. Nobody actually knows how many flytraps there are. Nobody knows exactly how many are being poached. The only number any academic has come up with is 35,000 left in the wild, but it's unclear how accurate that number is.

We do know they only grow in a handful of places. We do know they're disappearing by the thousands from the wild, and it's also clear the poachers are not just hoarding the plants. They're selling them. When Brandon Dean has caught poachers in the past, they've told him they sell to local nurseries, who pay anywhere from 10 to 25 cents a plant. 1,000 plants in a day could turn into a couple hundred bucks.

Where do you get a sense that they're selling them to?

Brandon Dean: We've never really looked into it. Most of them say that they sell them to a place called Flytrap Farms.

Eric Mennel: I just have to ask you, because it's part of my job. Just be honest. Have you ever knowingly bought from poachers?

Joe Wood: Oh, sure.

Eric Mennel: That was a little tough to hear. But Joe Wood admits he has bought from poachers in the past. On a couple of carnivorous plant message boards, people have accused Joe Wood and Flytrap Farm of buying poached plants for years. One person I talked to called the break-in at Joe's nursery "karma," and Joe doesn't hide the fact that he bought from locals. In fact, it's not illegal to buy the plants, only to dig them up from the wild. But Joe likes to make a distinction.

Joe Wood: They had licenses to buy. I mean, we always had licenses. What is considered poachers now, they used to all be considered farmers.

Eric Mennel: Turns out, people have been digging up plants in Brunswick County for decades. But it was always sort of a controlled chaos. The state would give out licenses, and you could ask permission to pull from other people's property. Problem is, a flytrap from someone's backyard looks exactly like a flytrap from protected lands. There's no way to verify where it actually came from. So when someone showed up at Flytrap Farm with a license and a backpack filled with 1,000 traps, Joe could buy them. But now, Joe says, he won't even do that. The state has gotten stricter, and if he got caught buying poached plants, he's afraid he'd get shut down.

[Music.]

There are a handful of nurseries in the state that deal mainly in carnivorous plants. What everyone seems to agree on is that these nurseries, be it Flytrap Farm or some of their competitors, are not the end buyer. They're just the middlemen. Somebody is buying in bulk at a rate unlike anything before, and most people have the same theory.

Joe Wood: There's a guy in New York, and he's got a deal going where he claims the juice from these plants will cure cancer.

Angie Carl: There's something that's called Carnivora that is being deemed like a thing that will get rid of your cancer, and it has a picture of a flytrap on it.

Joe Wood: So he's buying about 4 million plants a year and crushing them and taking the juice from them. Then he's mixing it with something else, and he claims it's a cure for cancer.

[Phone ringing.]

Receptionist: Carnivora Research International.

Eric Mennel: Carnivora was created by a German physician in the 1970s named Helmut Keller. The company has two products, liquid drops and capsules, made from what it calls 'pure extract

of Venus flytrap.' It's billed as nature's nutritional powerhouse. I called Carnivora headquarters, hoping I might talk with Helmut Keller, the creator.

Richard Ostrow: He's around, but not on this side, I reckon.

Eric Mennel: This is Richard Ostrow, now the owner and CEO of Carnivora.

Richard Ostrow: He's on the other side. He had passed away about four years ago.

Eric Mennel: Oh, okay. I'm sorry to hear that.

Richard Ostrow: That's okay.

Eric Mennel: Ostrow got interested in the company well over a decade ago, when he says he saw firsthand what the product could do.

Richard Ostrow: The reason that I had met Dr. Keller originally is because my mother needed his services. She had smoked since she was 14, and you know what can happen there. So she ended up with a disease that we're prohibited from mentioning in this country.

Eric Mennel: He's talking about cancer.

Richard Ostrow: We brought her over to an Irish clinic, where he was at the time, and he was literally bringing her back to life. But the story didn't end well, because he had to leave the clinic and go back to Germany. And the FDA would not allow me to import Carnivora to the United States, and she lost her battle.

Eric Mennel: Because you couldn't get Carnivora here in the States?

Richard Ostrow: 100%. Absolutely. Yes.

Eric Mennel: Because of FDA restrictions, Carnivora cannot claim to actually cure any diseases.

Richard Ostrow: We can say, "This is a powerful immune defense supplement," which of course it is, and that it wakes up specific immune cells to turn on your immune system to do the job that it's meant to do.

Eric Mennel: Right. But just to make sure I'm clear, in other countries, you're allowed to claim that it either prevents or helps cure many diseases, such as cancer.

Richard Ostrow: I won't answer that question in the United States. But, here's the but, we can say any damn thing we choose in freer countries, of which there are many.

Eric Mennel: Chances are, you've never heard of Carnivora, but as Richard Ostrow tells it, the company is doing just fine. In fact, the last couple of years, they've been in the market for more flytraps, a lot more.

Richard Ostrow: The growth in the U.S. has been astronomical in the last five years.

Eric Mennel: What kind of growth are we talking about? Can I ask how many customers, give or take?

Richard Ostrow: Well, how — how do I show the growth here? The best way to find out is we're in the midst of hiring a PR firm, because we're launching our pet division, and they're going to put the word out there in the United States like never before.

[Music.]

Eric Mennel: Do you import or, rather, buy flytraps from North Carolina, then?

Richard Ostrow: No. No, we don't touch North Carolina. They couldn't possibly supply us the amount of Venus flytraps that we would need.

Eric Mennel: Ostrow says Carnivora buys flytraps by the kilogram, not the plant, and they're not just buying wild-grown plants. They're also buying something called tissue culture. Tissue culture is essentially cloned flytraps. Giant labs, mainly in the Netherlands and China, have taken flytrap tissue and used it to make a massive number of genetically identical flytraps. Yes, even an indigenous American carnivorous plant is now made in China.

Ostrow says Carnivora is a mix of wild-grown and tissue-cultured flytraps, and he says the company hasn't gone near North Carolina traps in eight or nine years. The demand is higher than North Carolina can handle, he says. But he won't go any further.

Can I ask what maybe from what state or country you're able to help meet those demands?

Richard Ostrow: I can't get into that, either. The reason I won't get into that is because I'm not tipping off anybody who could use it against us.

[Music.]

Eric Mennel: At every step of the way, it's harder to know who's telling the truth. The poachers could be lying about who they sell to. The nurseries could be lying about who they buy from. And if the fast-growing alternative medicine market isn't driving the poaching, it's unclear what is. So what do you do?

Back in Brunswick County, the sheriff's office has charged someone with the robbery at Flytrap Farm, a local man. He's 23 years old, charged with two felony counts of breaking and entering

and two counts of felony larceny. In a lot of ways, it's one of the more serious penalties ever levied against someone for flytrap theft, which sounds great. But frankly, it'll probably just make poachers more cautious and keep them out of nurseries and in the swamps, where the penalties are negligible.

Brandon Dean.

Brandon Dean: The thing about it is it's so hard to catch them. When you do catch them, they pretty much laugh at you, and they tell you they're making too much money, because they only get caught once a year, once every three years, and they're doing it pretty much every day they can. So they're making out like a bandit.

Eric Mennel: Yeah. So even if they got charged 150 bucks in fines or whatever, that's one night's worth of flytraps?

Brandon Dean: That's correct. That's correct. That's the problem we have. Until there's a stiffer penalty put in place, they're going to continue to come out here and rape the resources, so to speak.

Angie Carl: There's always going to be a criminal element. If there's money to be made, and a lot of it, they're going to steal the flytraps regardless.

Eric Mennel: Angie Carl at the Nature Conservancy disagrees with Officer Dean. She thinks going after the poachers won't have much effect at all. She thinks going after the middlemen, the nurseries who are buying the poached plants, is the best way to stop the market. Cut the snake off at the head sort of thing. There are efforts at the state level to make flytrap poaching a felony, but it's unclear how much weight there is behind the idea. So there's a possibility the plants will become even rarer, and as silly as it might seem, anytime a species disappears, there's one thought that comes to mind.

Angie Carl: I mean, what if it is a cure for cancer, and we've now just decimated all of our populations?

Eric Mennel: Even if that's overstating it, the other alternative is simply that we lose an important part of American biodiversity, the reality that if you want to see a Venus flytrap, a plant endemic to the American South, you'll have to buy a clone from a lab in China. So for now, Angie Carl and the Nature Conservancy are doing the only thing they can think of. They're trying to learn more about the market. They need more details in order to pressure lawmakers to help protect the plant, and they're going the route of any other organization with limited resources. They've hired a summer intern to look into it. She started this month.

[Music.]

Phoebe Judge: Eric Mennel. Criminal is produced by Eric, Lauren Spohrer, and me. Julienne Alexander does our episode art. If you like the show, you can subscribe in iTunes. Our website is thisiscriminal.org. We're also on Facebook and Twitter, @CriminalShow.

I'm Phoebe Judge. This is Criminal.

[Music fades out.]