



COMMON NAME

Darth Vader flower



THE FLOWERING MENACE

HOW BIG IS IT?

The plant can reach 3m (10ft) tall.

WHERE'S IT FROM?

Areas of Central America, in particular El Salvador, and as far south as Colombia. But it's much more common on Instagram.

WHAT'S ITS NATURAL HABITAT?

Humid meadows and soggy floodplains.

HOW'S IT POLLINATED?

By beetles and flies.

CAN I GROW IT AT HOME?

Yes, if you have the warmth and a tropical vibe.

Some plants get internet famous. Others don't. Back in 2017, a photo of a jumping dolphin plant (*Senecio peregrinus*) created a buzz when it got 10,500 retweets on Twitter because the plant's leaves look like dolphins. Others often posted online include Hot lips (see page 58) and the monkey orchid (*Dracula simia*), which has a flower that does indeed uncannily resemble a monkey's face.

But the most arresting of all cases of mistaken identity has to be the Darth Vader flower – and the pictures of it haven't been anywhere near Photoshop. This particular *Aristolochia* is quite a rare

Aristolochia salvadorensis* syn. *arborea

LATIN NAME

plant in the wild, but I was lucky enough to see one at the botanical gardens in Niigata, in Japan, where I also met the telegraph plant (see page 118).

The full cinematic effect of the Darth Vader flower isn't apparent at first, as the creepy hooded blooms are held close to the base, almost hidden from human view. But, lo and behold, when I crouched down, I was soon staring right into the face of the once-heroic Jedi Knight. If I were a *Star Wars* fan, I'd insert a knowing quip here, so I apologize. I'm more likely to be found watching soaps than sci-fi.

Going all out to attract pollinators

Up close and personal, the first thing you notice is the odour of an overflowing bin, since rotting meat is the scent of choice for the plant to attract its pollinators. The back of the hooded bloom is even covered with maroon veins, in an attempt to look just like a slab of meat as any creature approaches.

Inside, things get murkier, as the hood casts a shadow. Staring out of the darkness are two luminous "eyes", whose job is to

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HOW CURIOUS

When inside the large flower, extra nectar bounties are often available to the insect – in case they get stuck a little longer than they'd hoped.

entice pollinators into the deepest, darkest part of the flower. Here, beyond the eyes, a wall of sticky hairs slows them down, dusting them with pollen, like an economy car wash. As the hairs soften, the insect is free to go – with the plant hoping it will pootle off to pollinate another bloom.

Stealing the show

In the wild, *Aristolochia salvadorensis* is a straggly, rather unkempt plant, weaving its way up and across its natural habitat. The foliage is pretty and wisterialike, but with all the theatrics happening down below, it is usually overlooked.

When established, plants flower prolifically from their corky base. The fascinating flowers often stay open for a week, in which time they play host to an array of visiting pollinators. They are within easy stumbling distance for beetles to find, but they attract flies to their meaty platter, too. An invitation to a party in the dark? Yes, please!