



Figure 30.20 The (a) banyan tree, also known as the strangler fig, begins life as an epiphyte in a host tree. Aerial roots extend to the ground and support the growing plant, which eventually strangles the host tree. The (b) screw pine develops aboveground roots that help support the plant in sandy soils. (credit a: modification of work by "psyberartist"/Flickr; credit b: modification of work by David Eikhoff)

30.4 | Leaves

By the end of this section, you will be able to do the following:

- Identify the parts of a typical leaf
- Describe the internal structure and function of a leaf
- Compare and contrast simple leaves and compound leaves
- List and describe examples of modified leaves

Leaves are the main sites for photosynthesis: the process by which plants synthesize food. Most leaves are usually green, due to the presence of chlorophyll in the leaf cells. However, some leaves may have different colors, caused by other plant pigments that mask the green chlorophyll.

The thickness, shape, and size of leaves are adapted to the environment. Each variation helps a plant species maximize its chances of survival in a particular habitat. Usually, the leaves of plants growing in tropical rainforests have larger surface areas than those of plants growing in deserts or very cold conditions, which are likely to have a smaller surface area to minimize water loss.

Structure of a Typical Leaf

Each leaf typically has a leaf blade called the **lamina**, which is also the widest part of the leaf. Some leaves are attached to the plant stem by a **petiole**. Leaves that do not have a petiole and are directly attached to the plant stem are called **sessile** leaves. Small green appendages usually found at the base of the petiole are known as **stipules**. Most leaves have a midrib, which travels the length of the leaf and branches to each side to produce veins of vascular tissue. The edge of the leaf is called the margin. **Figure 30.21** shows the structure of a typical eudicot leaf.

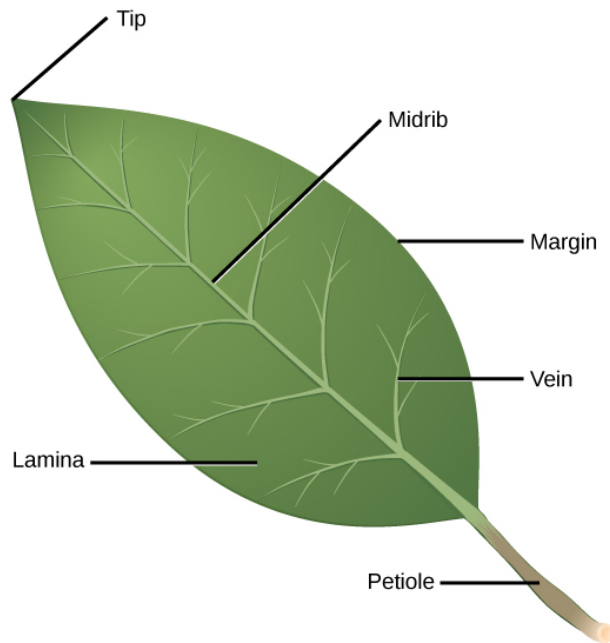


Figure 30.21 Deceptively simple in appearance, a leaf is a highly efficient structure.

Within each leaf, the vascular tissue forms veins. The arrangement of veins in a leaf is called the **venation** pattern. Monocots and dicots differ in their patterns of venation (**Figure 30.22**). Monocots have parallel venation; the veins run in straight lines across the length of the leaf without converging at a point. In dicots, however, the veins of the leaf have a net-like appearance, forming a pattern known as reticulate venation. One extant plant, the *Ginkgo biloba*, has dichotomous venation where the veins fork.

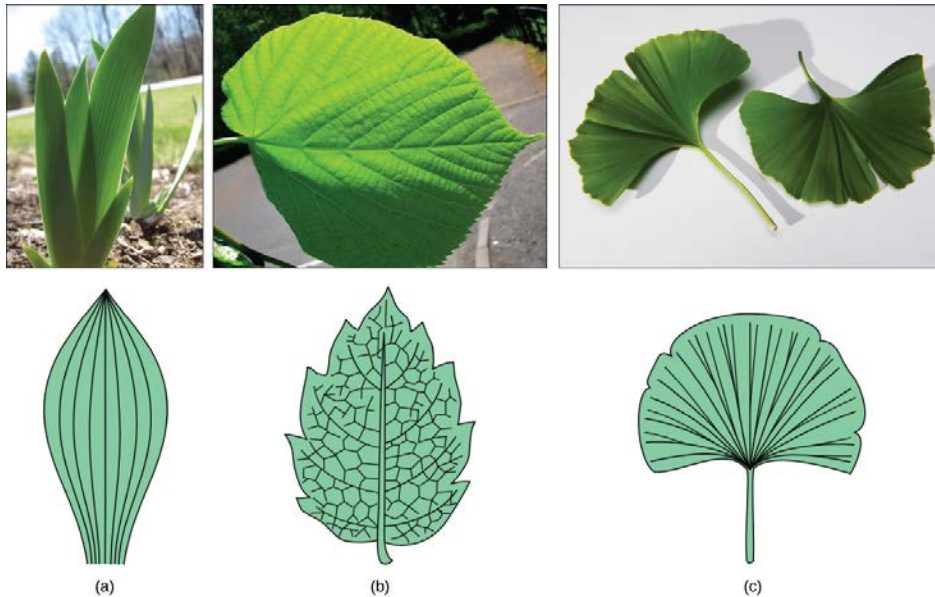


Figure 30.22 (a) Tulip (*Tulipa*), a monocot, has leaves with parallel venation. The netlike venation in this (b) linden (*Tilia cordata*) leaf distinguishes it as a dicot. The (c) *Ginkgo biloba* tree has dichotomous venation. (credit a photo: modification of work by "Drewboy64"/Wikimedia Commons; credit b photo: modification of work by Roger Griffith; credit c photo: modification of work by "geishaboy500"/Flickr; credit abc illustrations: modification of work by Agnieszka Kwiecień)

Leaf Arrangement

The arrangement of leaves on a stem is known as **phyllotaxy**. The number and placement of a plant's leaves will vary depending on the species, with each species exhibiting a characteristic leaf arrangement. Leaves are

classified as either alternate, spiral, or opposite. Plants that have only one leaf per node have leaves that are said to be either alternate—meaning the leaves alternate on each side of the stem in a flat plane—or spiral, meaning the leaves are arrayed in a spiral along the stem. In an opposite leaf arrangement, two leaves arise at the same point, with the leaves connecting opposite each other along the branch. If there are three or more leaves connected at a node, the leaf arrangement is classified as **whorled**.

Leaf Form

Leaves may be simple or compound (**Figure 30.23**). In a **simple leaf**, the blade is either completely undivided—as in the banana leaf—or it has lobes, but the separation does not reach the midrib, as in the maple leaf. In a **compound leaf**, the leaf blade is completely divided, forming leaflets, as in the locust tree. Each leaflet may have its own stalk, but is attached to the rachis. A **palmately compound leaf** resembles the palm of a hand, with leaflets radiating outwards from one point. Examples include the leaves of poison ivy, the buckeye tree, or the familiar houseplant *Schefflera* sp. (common name “umbrella plant”). **Pinnately compound leaves** take their name from their feather-like appearance; the leaflets are arranged along the midrib, as in rose leaves (*Rosa* sp.), or the leaves of hickory, pecan, ash, or walnut trees.

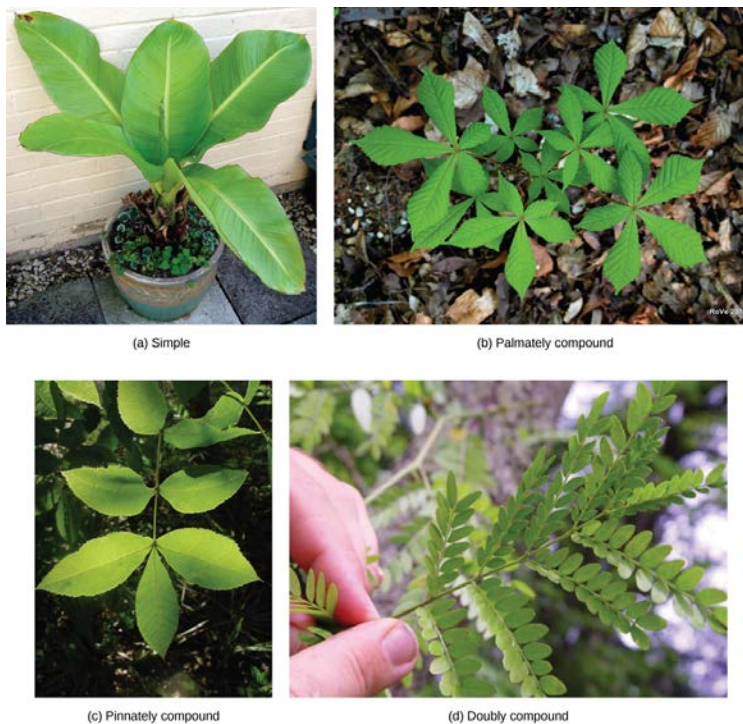


Figure 30.23 Leaves may be simple or compound. In simple leaves, the lamina is continuous. The (a) banana plant (*Musa* sp.) has simple leaves. In compound leaves, the lamina is separated into leaflets. Compound leaves may be palmate or pinnate. In (b) palmately compound leaves, such as those of the horse chestnut (*Aesculus hippocastanum*), the leaflets branch from the petiole. In (c) pinnately compound leaves, the leaflets branch from the midrib, as on a scrub hickory (*Carya floridana*). The (d) honey locust has double compound leaves, in which leaflets branch from the veins. (credit a: modification of work by "BazzaDaRambler"/Flickr; credit b: modification of work by Roberto Verzo; credit c: modification of work by Eric Dion; credit d: modification of work by Valerie Lykes)

Leaf Structure and Function

The outermost layer of the leaf is the epidermis; it is present on both sides of the leaf and is called the upper and lower epidermis, respectively. Botanists call the upper side the adaxial surface (or adaxis) and the lower side the abaxial surface (or abaxis). The epidermis helps in the regulation of gas exchange. It contains stomata (**Figure 30.24**): openings through which the exchange of gases takes place. Two guard cells surround each stoma, regulating its opening and closing.

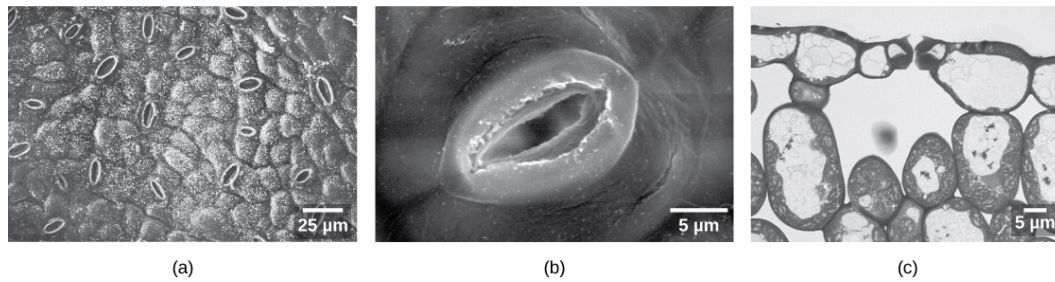


Figure 30.24 Visualized at 500x with a scanning electron microscope, several stomata are clearly visible on (a) the surface of this sumac (*Rhus glabra*) leaf. At 5,000x magnification, the guard cells of (b) a single stoma from lyre-leaved sand cress (*Arabidopsis lyrata*) have the appearance of lips that surround the opening. In this (c) light micrograph cross-section of an *A. lyrata* leaf, the guard cell pair is visible along with the large, sub-stomatal air space in the leaf. (credit: modification of work by Robert R. Wise; part c scale-bar data from Matt Russell)

The epidermis is usually one cell layer thick; however, in plants that grow in very hot or very cold conditions, the epidermis may be several layers thick to protect against excessive water loss from transpiration. A waxy layer known as the **cuticle** covers the leaves of all plant species. The cuticle reduces the rate of water loss from the leaf surface. Other leaves may have small hairs (trichomes) on the leaf surface. Trichomes help to deter herbivory by restricting insect movements, or by storing toxic or bad-tasting compounds; they can also reduce the rate of transpiration by blocking air flow across the leaf surface (**Figure 30.25**).

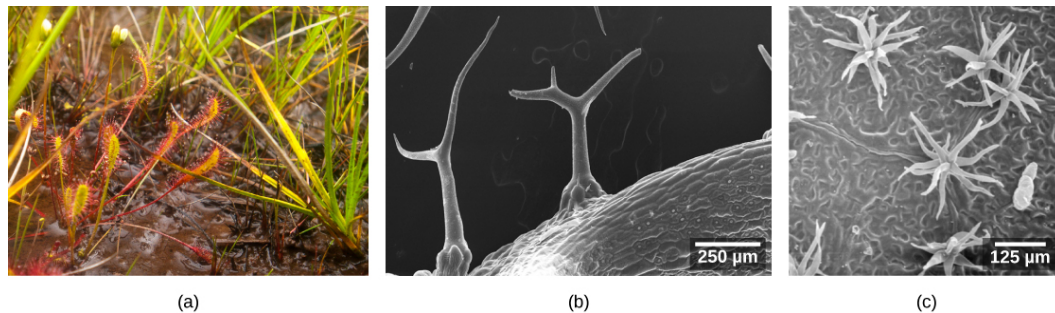


Figure 30.25 Trichomes give leaves a fuzzy appearance as in this (a) sundew (*Drosera* sp.). Leaf trichomes include (b) branched trichomes on the leaf of *Arabidopsis lyrata* and (c) multibranched trichomes on a mature *Quercus marilandica* leaf. (credit a: John Freeland; credit b, c: modification of work by Robert R. Wise; scale-bar data from Matt Russell)

Below the epidermis of dicot leaves are layers of cells known as the mesophyll, or “middle leaf.” The mesophyll of most leaves typically contains two arrangements of parenchyma cells: the palisade parenchyma and spongy parenchyma (**Figure 30.26**). The palisade parenchyma (also called the palisade mesophyll) has column-shaped, tightly packed cells, and may be present in one, two, or three layers. Below the palisade parenchyma are loosely arranged cells of an irregular shape. These are the cells of the spongy parenchyma (or spongy mesophyll). The air space found between the spongy parenchyma cells allows gaseous exchange between the leaf and the outside atmosphere through the stomata. In aquatic plants, the intercellular spaces in the spongy parenchyma help the leaf float. Both layers of the mesophyll contain many chloroplasts. Guard cells are the only epidermal cells to contain chloroplasts.

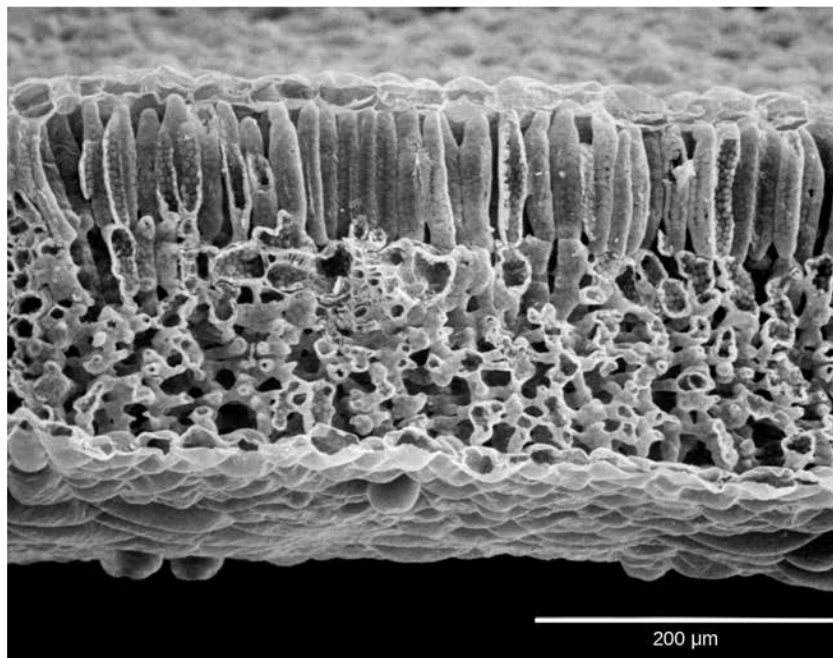
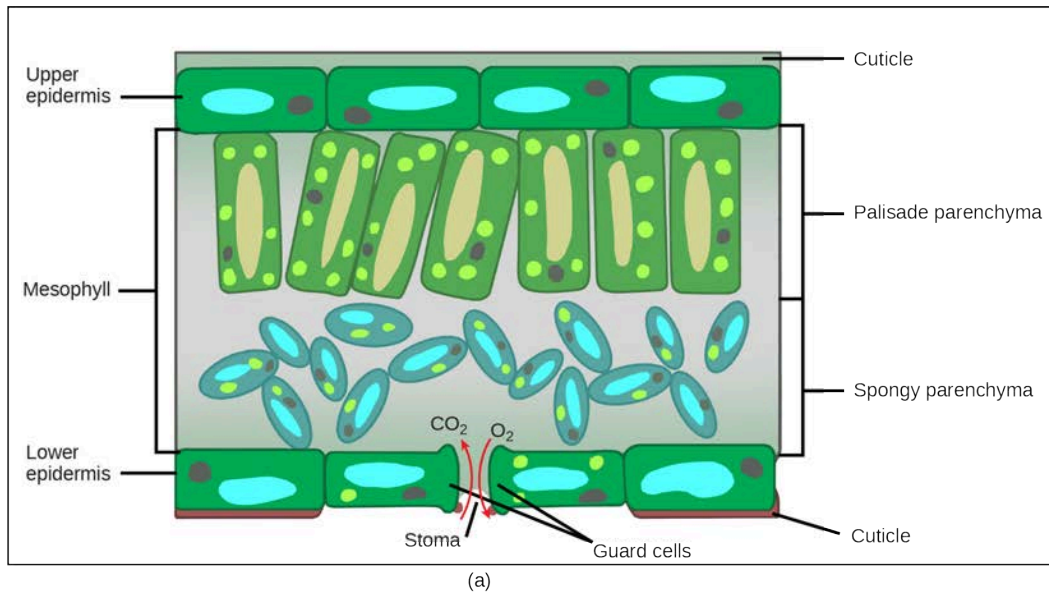


Figure 30.26 In the (a) leaf drawing, the central mesophyll is sandwiched between an upper and lower epidermis. The mesophyll has two layers: an upper palisade layer comprised of tightly packed, columnar cells, and a lower spongy layer, comprised of loosely packed, irregularly shaped cells. Stomata on the leaf underside allow gas exchange. A waxy cuticle covers all aerial surfaces of land plants to minimize water loss. These leaf layers are clearly visible in the (b) scanning electron micrograph. The numerous small bumps in the palisade parenchyma cells are chloroplasts. Chloroplasts are also present in the spongy parenchyma, but are not as obvious. The bumps protruding from the lower surface of the leave are glandular trichomes, which differ in structure from the stalked trichomes in **Figure 30.25**. (credit b: modification of work by Robert R. Wise)

Like the stem, the leaf contains vascular bundles composed of xylem and phloem (**Figure 30.27**). The xylem consists of tracheids and vessels, which transport water and minerals to the leaves. The phloem transports the photosynthetic products from the leaf to the other parts of the plant. A single vascular bundle, no matter how large or small, always contains both xylem and phloem tissues.

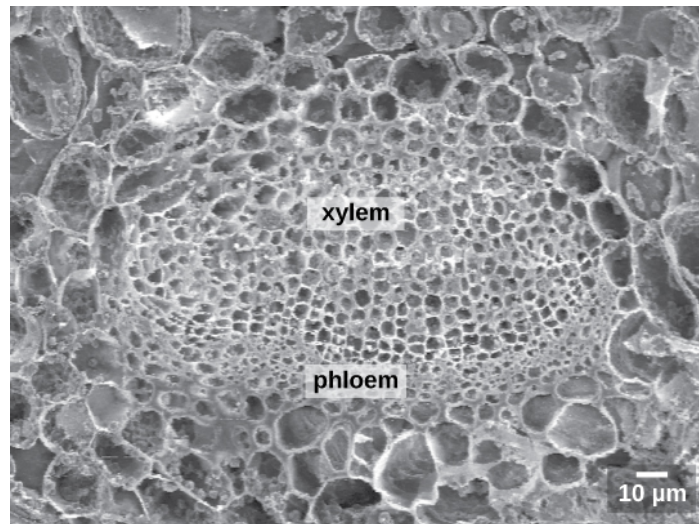


Figure 30.27 This scanning electron micrograph shows xylem and phloem in the leaf vascular bundle from the lyre-leaved sand cress (*Arabidopsis lyrata*). (credit: modification of work by Robert R. Wise; scale-bar data from Matt Russell)

Leaf Adaptations

Coniferous plant species that thrive in cold environments, like spruce, fir, and pine, have leaves that are reduced in size and needle-like in appearance. These needle-like leaves have sunken stomata and a smaller surface area: two attributes that aid in reducing water loss. In hot climates, plants such as cacti have leaves that are reduced to spines, which in combination with their succulent stems, help to conserve water. Many aquatic plants have leaves with wide lamina that can float on the surface of the water, and a thick waxy cuticle on the leaf surface that repels water.



Watch “The Pale Pitcher Plant” episode of the **video** (http://openstaxcollege.org//plants_cool_too) series *Plants Are Cool, Too*, a Botanical Society of America video about a carnivorous plant species found in Louisiana.

evolution CONNECTION

Plant Adaptations in Resource-Deficient Environments

Roots, stems, and leaves are structured to ensure that a plant can obtain the required sunlight, water, soil nutrients, and oxygen resources. Some remarkable adaptations have evolved to enable plant species to thrive in less than ideal habitats, where one or more of these resources is in short supply.

In tropical rainforests, light is often scarce, since many trees and plants grow close together and block much of the sunlight from reaching the forest floor. Many tropical plant species have exceptionally broad leaves to maximize the capture of sunlight. Other species are epiphytes: plants that grow on other plants that serve as a physical support. Such plants are able to grow high up in the canopy atop the branches of other trees, where sunlight is more plentiful. Epiphytes live on rain and minerals collected in the branches and leaves of the supporting plant. Bromeliads (members of the pineapple family), ferns, and orchids are examples of tropical epiphytes (**Figure 30.28**). Many epiphytes have specialized tissues that enable them to efficiently capture and store water.



Figure 30.28 One of the most well known bromeliads is Spanish moss (*Tillandsia usneoides*), seen here in an oak tree. (credit: Kristine Paulus)

Some plants have special adaptations that help them to survive in nutrient-poor environments. Carnivorous plants, such as the Venus flytrap and the pitcher plant (**Figure 30.29**), grow in bogs where the soil is low in nitrogen. In these plants, leaves are modified to capture insects. The insect-capturing leaves may have evolved to provide these plants with a supplementary source of much-needed nitrogen.

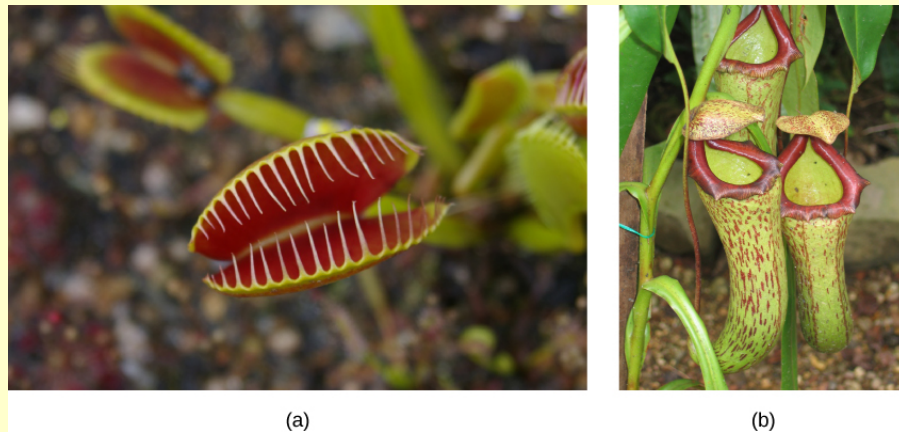


Figure 30.29 The (a) Venus flytrap has modified leaves that can capture insects. When an unlucky insect touches the trigger hairs inside the leaf, the trap suddenly closes. The opening of the (b) pitcher plant is lined with a slippery wax. Insects crawling on the lip slip and fall into a pool of water in the bottom of the pitcher, where they are digested by bacteria. The plant then absorbs the smaller molecules. (credit a: modification of work by Peter Shanks; credit b: modification of work by Tim Mansfield)

Many swamp plants have adaptations that enable them to thrive in wet areas, where their roots grow submerged underwater. In these aquatic areas, the soil is unstable and little oxygen is available to reach the roots. Trees such as mangroves (*Rhizophora* sp.) growing in coastal waters produce aboveground roots that help support the tree (**Figure 30.30**). Some species of mangroves, as well as cypress trees, have pneumatophores: upward-growing roots containing pores and pockets of tissue specialized for gas exchange. Wild rice is an aquatic plant with large air spaces in the root cortex. The air-filled tissue—called aerenchyma—provides a path for oxygen to diffuse down to the root tips, which are embedded in oxygen-poor bottom sediments.



Figure 30.30 The branches of (a) mangrove trees develop aerial roots, which descend to the ground and help to anchor the trees. (b) Cypress trees and some mangrove species have upward-growing roots called pneumatophores that are involved in gas exchange. Aquatic plants such as (c) wild rice have large spaces in the root cortex called aerenchyma, visualized here using scanning electron microscopy. (credit a: modification of work by Roberto Verzo; credit b: modification of work by Duane Burdick; credit c: modification of work by Robert R. Wise)



Watch *Venus Flytraps: Jaws of Death*, an extraordinary BBC close-up of the Venus flytrap in action. (This multimedia resource will open in a browser.) (<http://cnx.org/content/m66599/1.3/#eip-id1168018040099>)