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Let's go on asking why

The Boston Globe

THURSDAY, FEBRUARY 3, 2005

Research exploring how the Venus flytrap snaps shut on its prey may not receive a Nobel Prize, but scientific curiosity can be its own reward, leading to serendipitous discovery as well as making the pulse race.

Lakshminarayanan Mahadevan, a Harvard University professor of applied mathematics and mechanics, who led the team that published its carnivorous plant findings in the journal Nature last week, has made a career of looking into things just because they're interesting.

Mahadevan has studied the patterns of crumpled paper, analyzed the way fabric folds and wrinkles, and stared at the feet of houseflies to determine what makes them stick, and then unstick, to ceilings and walls.

The Venus flytrap research tracked the near-instantaneous closing of the plant when food lands on its maw-like leaves. Mahadevan's team showed that the plant keeps those leaves stretched taut like a rubber band, and that the pent-up energy is released to capture the prey.

The point of the experiment was to

answer the question people ask about the world from the time they can talk: Why? "The questions I ask are not important on a grand scale, but they're interesting because they're around us," Mahadevan told the Harvard University Gazette last summer.

Mahadevan should be an inspiration to educators seeking to ignite young minds, and to anyone who wants to keep his or her own gray matter nourished.

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