



# Skunk-cabbage blooming in wetlands

By Dr. Susan E. Yost

## Garden Tales

On a cold winter's walk in the January woods, all is quiet and plant growth seems to be at a standstill. However, one common native plant is already sending up its unique flower clusters. Along the edges of swamps and other wet areas, skunk-cabbage (*Symplocarpus foetidus*) is emerging from the soil.

Skunk-cabbage flowers come out before the leaves, even in the snow. The flowering structure is unusual — a purplish or greenish, sometimes mottled, modified leaf (the spathe), en-

closing a round fleshy ball of tiny flowers (the spadix). Skunk-cabbage is in the Arum family (Araceae), along with jack-in-the-pulpit (*Arisaema*), peace lily (*Spathiphyllum*), and flamingo flower (*Anthurium*) — all with the characteristic spathe and spadix inflorescences (flower clusters).

One of the most amazing things about these flowering structures is that they produce

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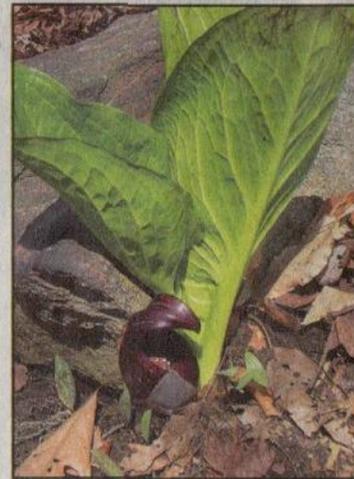
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heat, which helps to release odors that attract insect pollinators like flies and bees. One study measured the temperature inside skunk-cabbage spathes at a remarkable 36 degrees Fahrenheit, on average, above the outside air temperature. This has been said to melt the snow around a plant.

By early spring, skunk-cabbage forms dense masses of cabbage-like leaves. As this is one of the first herbaceous plants to grow abundantly in the early spring, it is easy to locate wet areas and the edges of streams, demarcated by the green of skunk-cabbage plants.

Skunk-cabbage produces its leaves before the trees above it leaf out, and therefore can thrive on the sunlight that comes down to the forest floor early in the year. An individual skunk-cabbage plant may be decades old — even as old as some of the much larger forest trees above them. The



Submitted photo

**Skunk-cabbage, or *Symplocarpus foetidus*, is a native wetland plant that starts to flower as early as January in Delaware.**

roots, wrinkled in a ring-like pattern, are contractile and pull the plant deeper into the soil.

Children usually get a kick out of smelling a piece of skunk-cabbage because this will memorably explain the origin of its common

name. The scientific name “foetidus” also refers to the unpleasant odor.

Eating raw skunk-cabbage causes intense burning in the mouth and throat because it contains calcium oxalate crystals. However, if the young leaves are very thoroughly dried, they are said to be edible as a cooked green. One unusual use, by Native American Indians, was as an underarm deodorant.

Skunk-cabbage is useful as a wetland indicator plant. It can be propagated by seeds, dividing the underground parts, or transplanting the dormant plant.

*Editor's note: Dr. Susan Yost is educator at the Claude E. Phillips Herbarium on the campus of Delaware State University. The herbarium is Delaware's center for research, education and outreach about plant identifications, locations, and uses. Call 857-6452 (Dr. Susan Yost) to arrange a tour of the herbarium, or for more information about this article.*