

When cold winter days have you confined to the indoors and cabin fever begins to set-in, don't despair and pine for spring, go in search of the malodorous skunk cabbage to raise your spirits and enlighten your senses.

Skunk cabbage, *Symplocarpus foetidus* (L.) Salisb. ex Nutt. is a perennial monocot of the Araceae, the Arum family. Skunk cabbage is a monotypic genus, meaning that *Symplocarpus* is a genus with only one species.

Skunk cabbage is named for its smell, which is quite obvious when the plant is bruised or crushed and smells a bit like burning rubber. Insects, such as carrion flies are attracted to such foul odors and thus help to pollinate the flowers. The specific epithet *foetidus* means fetid, or to stink.

Skunk cabbage is considered a wetland plant and is common throughout Delaware. It is typically found growing in the shade, on poorly drained soils in swamps and in seepy floodplains. The overall natural distribution of skunk cabbage in North America is from Quebec and Nova Scotia, south to North Carolina, and west to Minnesota and Iowa. Skunk cabbage is also found growing in east Asia.

In Delaware, skunk cabbage flowers in February even if the ground is snow covered!

The combination of the plants dark color, which absorbs heat from the sun, and the rapid growth of the flower-bud produce enough heat to actually melt snow immediately around the plant. Studies have shown that the plant starts to produce heat once the temperature is above freezing and can keep itself at a fairly constant temperature of slightly over 70 degrees Fahrenheit.

The leaves of skunk cabbage are ovate in shape and can be quite large, about 2-3 feet long and about 1-2 feet wide. The leaves contain calcium oxide crystals that cause a burning sensation when eaten and may protect the leaves from some predators. The leaves die back in the fall, but in late summer, a flower-bud and leaf-bud have already been produced underneath the leaves and this is how the plant will overwinter.

In winter, skunk cabbage can be seen as two types of buds: a flower-bud that is enveloped by a hood-like covering (technically called a spathe), and immediately next to the flower-bud is a leaf-bud, which is a pointed cone with next seasons leaves tightly coiled inside. Both flower and leaf-buds are about 6-8 inches tall. The spathe is composed of a spongy material and is green in color and is usually mottled with dark brown or purple coloration's. The leaf-bud is light green in color. As mentioned, the spathe encloses the flower-bud, technically called a spadix. The spadix is defined as a club-like stalk, or spike composed of small flowers crowded together on a thickened axis.

The roots of skunk cabbage slightly contract each growing season, which pulls the plant down into the earth just a fraction of an inch each year. In this way, the leaves and buds always stay low to the ground.

Flowers bloom before the leaves emerge and during flowering, one side of the spathe begins to open and you can see the spadix inside. The flowers are buried in the spadix and each flower is perfect, meaning they have both male and female parts. It may take up to 7 or more years for a single plant to be strong enough to produce flowers. The seeds are matured inside the spadix and are grouped together into what is called a compound fruit. Consider the genus name, *Symplocarpus*, symploce means “connection,” and carpus refers to fruit, taken together, *Symplocarpus* means a binding together of the fruits. Seeds are dispersed in late summer and they are usually about the size of marbles.

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