

Notable Natives

Skunk Cabbage

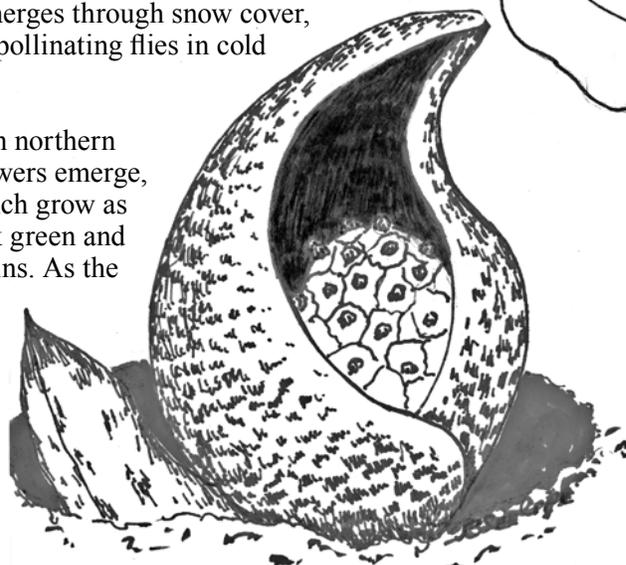
Symplocarpus foetidus, skunk cabbage, is a unique spring woodland plant native to northern Illinois. It inhabits wet woods, stream-sides, wetlands, hillside seeps, and other shaded areas with wet, mucky soil. In the Araceae family, it is related to *Arisaema triphyllum*, Jack-in-the-pulpit, another spring woodland wildflower.

Like other plants in this family, skunk cabbage flowers have a spadix that is covered by many perfect flowers (flowers that include both male and female reproductive parts). A large bract, called a spathe, encloses the entire inflorescence (the cluster of flowers on the stem). This bract can be many colors, ranging from pale yellow to dark purple, depending on the local ecotype.

Symplocarpus, the genus, comes from the Greek *symploce* and *carpos*, meaning connection and fruit. This refers to the many flowers on the spadix that produce the fruit and seeds. The species name *foetidus* refers to the offensive odor produced when the leaves are crushed. Calcium oxalate crystals, a natural toxin, are produced in the leaves to deter herbivores from munching on the plant.

Since the early spring weather is too cold for most bees and other pollinators when it blooms, skunk cabbage relies on flies and gnats for pollination. In fact, the flowers produce an unpleasant odor and the spathe resembles carrion in order to attract these insects. This plant is the earliest blooming native woodland wildflower with the flowers actually producing their own heat, up to an amazing 95°F! This is warm enough to melt snow since it often emerges through snow cover, and the heat is a benefit to pollinating flies in cold weather.

As early as late February in northern Illinois, skunk cabbage flowers emerge, followed by the leaves, which grow as a basal rosette and are dark green and hairless with smooth margins. As the days progress, the leaves grow larger, reaching a maximum size of two feet long and a foot across by mid-summer after which



Symplocarpus Foetidus
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the plants wilt and wither away. The plants reproduce readily by seed and will create colonies around a mother plant. They do not reproduce through rhizomes.

Although toxic to many herbivores, the Native Americans used skunk cabbage as an important herbal medicine. They used fresh leaves to treat headaches and sores and roots to make into infusions to treat colds, coughs, sore throats, and earaches. They also dried the roots to make into tea and powdered and mixed roots with grease to treat everything from asthma to skin sores and to stop bleeding, muscle pain and rheumatism.

This spring when you're walking in the woods, don't shy away from the wet areas; seek them out, and you may come across this unique flower native to our woods in northern Illinois.

—Tim Moritz
Pizzo & Assoc.



Skunk cabbage illustration by Beth Cripe.