
Wildflower Spot – February 2007
John Clayton Chapter of the Virginia Native Plant Society

SKUNK CABBAGE

Symplocarpus foetidus

By Helen Hamilton, *President of the John Clayton Chapter, VNPS*

One of the few plants blooming in February, skunk cabbage is well-named because all parts, when crushed, smell of skunk. Children love to be repulsed by this plant! Growing in swamps and moist low ground, the flowers appear first, in a knob-shaped cluster inside a purple-brown and green mottled hood 2-5 inches long. The flowers generate enough heat to melt the surrounding snow. Biologists have found the flowers produce warmth over a period of 12-14 days, remaining an average of 36 degrees F about the outside air temperature, day or night. Like a warm-blooded animal, they can regulate their warmth. The heat and foul smell attract the first pollinating insects of the year (usually flies).

The large oval leaves resemble cabbage. They unfold after the plant blooms, and can grow 3-4 feet long. By mid-May a wetland can be covered with skunk cabbage leaf rosettes. By June the leaves begin to decay; since the plant forms no woody fibers, a large part of the leaf and stem is water, and the leaves simply dissolve. By mid-June the fruit heads are roundish balls, wine-red, about two inches in diameter. In August the fruit head falls apart, leaving seeds on the ground to be eaten, to decompose, or to germinate.



By the end of summer no trace of the plant is left, but a fully-grown skunk cabbage has a massive root system, with several years' reproductive parts partially formed within. Skunk cabbage is widely distributed in the state of Virginia, its range extending to Georgia and West Virginia. A truly remarkable, unusual plant! ❖

Photo: Skunk Cabbage(*Symplocarpus foetidus*) William S. Justice @ USDA-NRCS PLANTS Database
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