

Wildflower in Focus

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Skunk Cabbage

Symplocarpus foetidus (L.) Nutt.
Arum Family (*Araceae*)



SKUNK CABBAGE SYMPLOCARPUS FOETIDUS TINA THIEME BROWN © 2006

Maryland's earliest common spring wildflower is the skunk cabbage. Although it can reach a height of six inches and is very distinctive up close, skunk cabbage is well camouflaged and can be tricky to find unless you know where to look for it along streams and in and near marshes, swamps, seeps and springs. According to Leslie Hunter-Cario of the Maryland Native Plant Society Eastern Shore Chapter, skunk cabbage typically grows in seasonally flooded forested wetlands on the Eastern Shore. Skunk cabbage leaves, which appear as the flowers are dying back, are a brilliant spring green and impossible to miss. In our family, the first rite of spring is always a "skunk hunting" expedition. Soon after the skunk cabbage comes into bloom, the spring peepers begin their musical calls. Skunk cabbage and spring peepers share wooded wetland habitat and are cherished signs of spring in the Mid-Atlantic and northeast.

Flowers: The fleshy hooded spathe (a large bract surrounding the flower cluster) is usually wine red or brown and vertically speckled yellow or green, but may also be yellow or green with wine striations; 2-6" high. Inside is the round or ovoid spadix, a fleshy axis bearing the tiny true flowers.

Leaves: A vibrant yellow-green, springing up along streams and other wetland areas when the rest of the forest floor is still wintry. Prominently veined, with smooth or wavy margins, they are tightly coiled at first and then unfurl to a height of 1 - 3'. Leaves exude a skunky odor when crushed.

Habitat and Range: Swamps, marshes, streams, seeps, springs and wet woodlands; Nova Scotia and Quebec to Minnesota and Iowa, south in the Appalachians to Georgia.

Herbal Lore: Skunk cabbage has been widely employed medicinally. American Indians used the root to treat convulsions, whooping cough, toothache and other conditions. The root was also used as a poultice for wounds. Physicians later used it for epileptic seizures and severe coughs. The leaves have also been dried and reconstituted in soups and stews. (Warning: Contains calcium oxalate crystals. Eating the fresh leaves can burn the mouth and the roots are considered **toxic**. Only thorough drying removes irritating and toxic properties. See additional warning under "Similar Species".)

Similar Species: The leaves of the poisonous false hellebore (*Veratrum viride*) are often mistaken for skunk cabbage leaves. False hellebore favors the same wet habitats as does the skunk cabbage. False hellebore bears branching clusters of 6-parted yellow-green flowers. Jack-in-the-pulpit (*Arisaema triphyllum*) is in the same family as skunk cabbage and has a spathe and spadix. Jack-in-the-pulpit blooms later in the spring and only vaguely resembles skunk cabbage.

Blooming Time: January - April. The leaves outlast the flowers and are showy throughout the spring.

Locations: Throughout Maryland along streams, and in and near marshes, swamps, seeps and springs; Adkins Arboretum, Tuckahoe State Park, Jug Bay Wetlands Sanctuary, Battle Creek Cypress Swamp, Patuxent River Park, Rock Creek Park, C&O Canal, Watts Branch Stream Valley Park, Muddy Branch Stream Valley Park, Northwest Branch Stream Valley Park, Seneca Creek State Park, Hawlings River, Little Bennett Regional Park, Sugarloaf Mountain, Frederick Watershed, Catoctin Mountain and western mountains. (See **Finding Wildflowers in the Washington-Baltimore Area** by Cristol Fleming, Marion Blois Lobstein and Barbara Tufty for more information).

MNPS Board President Carole Bergmann and Board Members Cris Fleming and Karyn Molines and Leslie Hunter-Cario, Chairperson of the Eastern Shore Chapter, contributed to this article. Skunk cabbage text adapted from **An Illustrated Guide to Eastern Woodland Wildflowers and Trees: 350 Plants Observed at Sugarloaf Mountain, Maryland** (Choukas-Bradley and Brown, University of Virginia Press).