

Skunk Cabbage Dots Marsh-Lands Early

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Special Writer for The Birmingham Eclectic

Foolhardy naturalists who wander around early, in marshes and swamps, are now seeing the bloom of skunk cabbage, the first spring flower in our range. Undaunted by late snows and the raw winds of March it has already pushed its sharply pointed spathe through the mucky loam.

Not much to see, say you? Then you must look again. For the skunk cabbage (*Symplocarpus foetidus*) like many another of Nature's creations is something more than meets the glance of the casual observer.

First it asks you to get down on your knees beside it as I did today. This reverent gesture puts the beholder in a position to see and appreciate its unusual structure and its beauty.

It is a cousin (in the arum family) of the sporeless calla lily. Its mottled spathe resembling a monk's cowl, is folded around the central column of the flower with the same gesture of grace and elegant simplicity.

THIS SPECIALIZATION of an upper leaf to form a floral bract or a spathe is also employed by another relative, the well-known Jack-in-the-pulpit.

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In skunk cabbage there is a considerable variation in the coloring of its spathe. It may be purplish-black, rich-purple or dull rusty red—these mottled with shades of white, green or yellow.

The flowers themselves are crowded on the central column or spadix. Their beauty is usually reserved for the prying eyes of the Botanist who never travels far afield without his hat and lens.

I am always amazed at the perfection of their structure. They are crowded on the large fleshy central column making a kind of geometrical design. Each small flower is perfect with its own stamens and central pistil, its tiny floral envelope made up of four separate hooded and bronze-colored. The blooms ripen their pollen slowly as the spring sun warms the air. By September the spadix has developed into a column of fleshy berries enclosing the but-let-like seeds.

THE ODOR of skunk cabbage has been variously described as that of a mixture of onion, mustard plaster, spoiled beef and skunk's spray.

However unpleasant, it furnishes the bait which the plant needs to attract the first flies and insects which come from a long distance to pollinate the tiny flowers. This odor which arises from the fleshy leaves and root stalk is much heightened if these are trampled upon and crushed.

The leaves are first found, each tightly coiled and arranged around the colored spathe. As the season advances they uncoil into large and beautiful rosettes decorating the margins of swamps and the banks of streams with patches of richest green.

I had my most memorable encounter with skunk cabbage on the day that I first saw it growing in the swales of the Cossade range at Squaw Lake Pass. Here its spadix is more than a foot tall and its broad leaves reach a length of six feet.

This is the western variety (*Lysichiton kamtschatka*) which has a clear bright yellow spathe looking like a giant calla lily. Unfortunately it was August and we



MR. AND MRS. Harley C. Webb, 17600 Margate, Southfield, pictured as they left for a 12-day deluxe cruise to the Caribbean ports of the Netherlands West Indies, Venezuela and Colombia, sailing from New York on March 4 on Grace Line's "Santa Rosa".

could only imagine how spectacular would be its bloom in spring-time glowing in the dim and leafy aisles of this giant coniferous forest.

IN OUR OWN state the Indians made a pot herb of the abundant leaves, boiling them in huge cauldrons when they broke up their camps in the spring-time.

After their winter's diet of maize, wild rice, deer meat and fish, this dish appeased the body's natural craving for the greenery it had been long denied. My husband once tested its edibility while on a camping trip with the then venerable naturalist Ernest Thompson Seton. He, together with others who have sampled this plant, reports that it loses its unpleasant flavor when boiled.

Have you ever tried to pull up a stalk of skunk cabbage? You will find it firmly anchored with a tremendous root-stalk. Sometimes there will be a large potato-like tuber growing near the center of the plant. Both are nature's inventions for storing food for the winter.

In early spring the Indian squaws roamed the rich bottom lands filling their split-ash baskets with these fleshy root-stalks together with those of the Indian turnip (*Jacksonia*). They were then boiled and eaten like potatoes.

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taste of these roots is due to the needle-like crystals of calcium oxalate which they contain and which penetrate the tongue causing temporary swelling. This objection to their use as a food also disappears with boiling.

As the days lengthen, the life of the marsh will quicken. All that breathes and grows will, in its own time, give voice to its pattern and kind. The sealed leaf will burst its bonds; the marsh marigolds will light the hollows. The soft muck will give up its hibernating boards.

The frog will blow out his baggy throat; the turtle will find his way to the sunny log; the snake will slither over the wet mud. Soon beating wings will come to rest on the dried-out cat-tails.

But for yet a little while the silent marsh will belong to the skunk cabbage, ripening its tiny flowers within the protection of their dappled cowl.

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Irene E. Hanley
City Clerk

March 4, 1954

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