

land management



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Skunk Cabbage (*Symplocarpus foetidus*-Araceae)



Spring is right around the corner and it will be here before we know it. Once we have spotted this amazing wetland plant known as Skunk Cabbage (*Symplocarpus foetidus*), the restoration staff believes that spring will soon be here. This perennial plant can be seen at the Howard Colman Hall Creek Preserve in late winter to early spring. Basal leaves can be spotted as early as February or March, making this plant one of the first native wildflowers to bloom in the spring ultimately creating a rosette, a circular arrangement of leaves. Skunk Cabbage is a unique plant because it is one of the few plants that have the ability to regulate its own temperature, thermogenesis. This means that it has the ability to create its own heat to melt away snow and ice in order for it to push itself above the frozen ground to begin its growing cycle.

Skunk Cabbage prefers to grow in areas that has partial sun to light shade. It also desires to have wet soils, but can tolerate shallow standing water if it is temporary. This cabbage dislikes excessive heat from strong sunlight. Skunk Cabbage can be seen in wet woodlands, swamps, edges of a low and marshy or frequently flooded area of land, and near springs.

The leaves of Skunk Cabbage (below) are the most important characteristic for our restoration crew in determining the type of plant. The leaves are 24 inches long and 12 inches across that are medium to dark green in color and are hairless. They reach their maximum size early in the summer and disappear by the end of summer. The foliage contains crystals of calcium oxalate, which makes them toxic to most vertebrate herbivores. Not only do the leaves help to distinguish the plant, but its flower heads do too.



The flower heads, or inflorescence, of the Skunk Cabbage consists of a spadix which is a spike of minute flowers closely arranged around a fleshy axis. The spadix is typically enclosed in a curved spathe which is a large sheathing bract, or modified leaf, enclosing the flower cluster of certain plants. This flower head is located close to the ground. The spathe is about 4 to 6 inches long and 2 to 3 inches across. The outer surface of a spathe has stripes, streaks, or spots of purple and green. The spathe is also smooth and hairless. On one side of the spathe, it is open to reveal the spadix. The spadix is approximately 2 inches long and it varies from pale yellow to dark purple in color. It is also covered with small perfect flowers that are ¼ inches and consists of four sepals, one of the individual leaves of the flower.

The compound fruit of the Skunk Cabbage grows to be 4 inches tall and 3 inches across. The fruit is initially green and dark purple, but as the season goes on, it becomes dark brown or black as it disintegrates back into the ground. The fruits from the Skunk Cabbage are mature by late summer to early fall. Each fruit contains a single seed, which is about 1/3 inch across or a little larger. The seeds generally fall to the ground near the mother plant and will germinate there if they are not eaten or carried away by an animal.

Although the flowers of the Skunk Cabbage are beautiful in their own way, they have a terrible smell. They emit an odor similar to the decaying flesh of dead animals that flies can detect. Interestingly the flies are beneficial to the plant. Flesh flies, carrion flies, and various gnats pollinate Skunk Cabbage. Slugs and snails occasionally feed on the leaves of the cabbage as well. Spiders often live within the spathes to feed on insects that visit the flowers. Even though the leaves of the plant are toxic to certain animals, it is beneficial to others.

The restoration staff is managing the areas where the Skunk Cabbage is located within the Howard Colman Hall Creek Preserve to ensure its survival as well as the survival of other native plant species. As some researchers believe Skunk Cabbage can live for thousands of years, therefore they need to be protected. We are managing the areas by controlling and removing invasive species, such as Honeysuckle and Wild Parsnip, to give our native species a chance to thrive and reproduce within our natural areas.

