Skunk Cabbage Emerging

We live close to a creek and I enjoy walking around the block this time of year to check for signs of spring. Plants are emerging “strangely” this year thanks to our crazy winter! According to the “Ohio State Parks Nature Thing of the Month”, the first wildflower to pop through Ohio’s cold winter soil is the skunk cabbage. The skunk cabbage is as smelly as it sounds, but it has some amazing and surprising features that make it a one-of-a-kind plant.

Skunk cabbage can be found from late February until May near woodland streams, swamps or marshes. It’s an early bloomer because it has an incredible ability to produce heat. As the flower buds within the plant begin to grow in late winter, they create enough heat to melt the snow around the plant. The temperatures within the buds can reach a toasty 70 degrees, even in freezing weather. The heat not only helps protect the flower buds from the cold air, but also intensifies the skunky odor that attracts pollinators such as bees and flies.

The outer leaf of the skunk cabbage is cone shaped and wraps around the cluster of buds to form a kind of hood. The outer leaf is called the “spathe”. The cluster of flower buds inside, called the “spadix,” has many pockets to help insulate the plant.

Another remarkable feature of skunk cabbage is its roots. Spreading out from the central stem, the light colored bundle of roots looks a lot like large earthworms. Like earthworms, the roots have little ridges which contract slightly, pulling the plant down into the earth a fraction of an inch each year. After years of wriggling, the underground stem of mature skunk cabbages can grow anywhere from two to twelve inches long.

My wildflower identification books include the following information about skunk cabbage (Symplocarpus foetidus): Identification clues – Large, strongly ribbed leaves, 1-3 feet long, emerging from the ground in wet areas; flower a reddish-green hood with a pollen-studded ball in the center; blooms before leaves emerge, Family – Arum (Araceae), and Cycle/Origin – perennial, native.

In the “Wildflowers of Ohio” field guide written by Stan Tekiela, the author adds that the flowers have a strong odor of dead or decaying flesh, which attracts early flying insects that mistake the flowers as carrion and inadvertently pollinate the flowers.

The “Ohio State Parks Nature Thing of the Month” explains that the leaves of skunk cabbage contain calcium oxalate crystals, which create a burning sensation when eaten. This protects the plant from being munched by large predators.

If it is not disturbed in its natural habitat, a skunk cabbage plant may live for a very long time. No one knows for sure how old a skunk cabbage can get, but some researchers believe the largest ones could be hundreds of years old!

Be sure to mark your calendars for our garden seminar on Wednesday, March 18, 2020 at the Mt. Orab campus of Southern State Community College. Bell Pettit will talk about Growing Giant Pumpkins – Part 2”. We enjoyed his initial program a few years ago and he is back by popular demand! Remember that all seminars are free and open to the public and are held in Room 208. Even though it is March, we might still have some wintery weather, so remember, if Southern State Community College is closed due to winter weather, the seminar is cancelled. You can sign up for alerts at www.sssc.edu/alerts or call 937-444-7722.

We are in the initial stages of planning OSUE Master Gardener Volunteer training class starting in the fall. If you would like to add your name to the list who will be contacted about that upcoming class, please call the OSUE office in Brown County at 937-378-6716. Come join us!