

Polecat Weed

Skunk cabbage is widely known for its reputation of having a foul odor, but many persons have never seen the plant. Also called, rather fittingly, polecat weed, it has a hood-like appearance as it begins to emerge from damp earth in late winter.

The plant is found across Canada and southward in the United States to Tennessee. Interestingly, it is also found in China which is an intriguing bond between the flora of North America and the Orient. Even though growing widely in West Virginia, the polecat plant is most numerous in high mountain bogs such as those in Canaan Valley.

At first appearance, the plant looks somewhat like Jack-in-the-pulpit with the structure of the spathe above the spadix on which the small flowers appear. Aptly named, the skunk-like odor is especially evident when plant parts are bruised and broken.

Skunk cabbage is capable of thermogenesis which is the ability to produce warmth several degrees above the surround air temperature. Such a process makes possible its appearance when conditions are still winter-like with snow on the ground.

Thermogenesis was unknown in the time of Henry David Thoreau and he was amazed at the appearance of skunk cabbage under harsh weather conditions. One day in March, 1856, when snow covered the ground, he noted in his journal, "I was surprised to see the skunk-cabbage with its great spearheads open and ready to blossom."

The root system is somewhat unusual in that it pulls the stem deeper into the wetland earth creating downward growth instead of upward. Bears relish the plant and seem to tolerate without much discomfort the lingering stinging sensation.

Even though skunk cabbage has toxic properties, Native Americans found it has medicinal value in the treatment of respiratory ailments. Pioneer settlers learned the herbal lore of the Indians and turned to the plant in cases of asthma, whooping cough and bronchitis.

Bloodroot, spring beauty, yellow fawn lily and rue anemone are among the early wild flowers to bloom in spring. Lacking the beauty of other plants, the skunk cabbage, with its unpleasant aroma becomes an unlikely sign of spring often before the last blast of winter.
