



### Smells Like Spring?

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.

### Swamp Thing

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 air pockets to help insulate the plant.



### Remarkable Roots

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!

If it is not disturbed in its natural habitat, a skunk cabbage plant may live for a very long time. No one know for sure how old a skunk cabbage can get, but some researchers believe the largest ones could be hundreds of years old! Imagine seeing and sniffing the very same plant that Ohio's pioneers saw!

## Amazing Medicine

The skunk cabbage leaves would not make good slaw! They contain calcium oxalate crystals, which create a burning sensation when eaten. This protects the plant from being munched by large predators.

Even though parts of the plant are toxic, skunk cabbage is also known for its healing agents. In the past, American Indians would smell the crushed leaves of the plant as a cure for headaches. They made the raw root into a cream to relieve pain and swelling from muscle aches, and boiled a small amount of the root to make cough syrup and tea.

Isn't the Skunk Cabbage an amazing plant? To smell for yourself, go outside and visit your local state park to spy the budding sprouts of Skunk Cabbage.

Photos from left to right: **Skunk cabbage** emerging from the snow-covered ground • **Skunk cabbage** in a shallow pool of water • **the Spadix** • **Skunk cabbage** (photo courtesy of Frank Winters)

