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For more information, or to join
Wild Ones Natural Landscapers,
here's how to reach us:

Phone

(920) 730-3986
(877) 394-3954 (Toll-Free)

Mail

PO Box 1274
Appleton, WI 54912-1274

E-Mail

ExecDirector@wildones.org

WebSite

www.wildones.org

Celebrating natives
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Stalking the Wild Skunk Cabbage

By Barbara Bray

The hunt was on! We gathered our supplies and pulled on our sturdy boots to venture into the woods. After many weeks of cold and snow, I knew the time was right to search for the "awakening" skunk cabbage. We had been to the same spot a week earlier looking for the small hoods poking up out of the snow, but there was no sign of them at that time. We walked down the muddy path past the low, wet areas still frozen atop with a thin layer of ice.



Skunk Cabbage
(*Symplocarpus foetidus*)

Up a small hill and past the old fallen tree was our first sighting! Speckled with reddish-purple spots, the spathe rose up about 2 inches from the partly frozen, leafcovered ground. This showy bract surrounds the minute flowers that grow on the spadix, a rather swollen-looking spike in the center. We bent down to look at the flower more closely. My son, a typical 8-year-old, asked me, "Mom, are you really going to smell that flower?" I said to him, "No, all three of us are going to smell it!" He groaned a bit, but knew he couldn't get out of the woods until he smelled the skunk cabbage.

We expected to smell a foul odor. Why else would someone name this plant "skunk cabbage" (*Symplocarpus foetidus*)? The scientific name also suggests that a fetid odor is to be expected. I was the first one to smell the skunk cabbage blossom. To my surprise, I did not keel back in disgust. It was actually a very mild, pleasant odor. My daughter went next. She put her nose up close to the plant and then sat back up to say that it smelled like apples. My son, Ben, went last. He was willing to smell the blossom after watching us. His comment was that it smelled like wet dirt. So much for our expectations.

This was our second "Annual Hunt for Skunk Cabbage." It has become a new springtime tradition for us. When my children ask me why we need to look for skunk cabbage every year, I tell them it is the first sign of spring. While most other people wait for tulips to bloom in April or May, we can anticipate our first spring flower in late February or early March.

Skunk cabbage is a member of a very unusual family of plants, most of which grow in tropical areas. The arum family, to which skunk cabbage belongs, includes our common houseplants, philodendrons and dieffenbachia. These three plants, as well as others, display an unusual



feature: their inflorescences produce heat before pollination. In skunk cabbage, the temperature inside the spathe can become 20 to 25 degrees warmer than the outside air. In philodendrons, temperatures rise to 115 degrees even if the surrounding air temperature is much cooler. The heat causes substances within the plants to release badsmelling odors that are attractive to flies and beetles. Thus, skunk cabbage can grow up through a layer of snow while everything else is still buried; and it can attract flies to pollinate its flowers.

My hopes for our third "Annual Hunt for Skunk Cabbage" are to really get my children excited about the natural world. I want them to see this unusual plant growing up through a blanket of snow. I want them to be amazed by this on a freezing cold day. And I want them to see flies pollinating the tiny flowers inside the spathe.

If I lived elsewhere in the country, I would look for a plant with which to start a similar tradition. In the western United States, I would go in search of yellow skunk cabbage (*Lysichiton americanum*), or perhaps one of the desert parsleys (*Lomatium spp.*) if I lived in a drier area. In the southwest I might try searching for an unusual cactus in bloom. Wherever you live, there is always an opportunity to start your first "Annual Hunt." Grab your boots and your kids and go in search of your own amazing plant!