

Common name: **Skunk Cabbage**

Genus Species: ***Symplocarpus foetidus***



Photo credit: Joseph O'Brien, USDA Forest Service, Bugwood.org

Description: This unusual ephemeral wildflower emerges from moist ground early in the spring. A large brownish purple and green hood-like spathe encloses an ovoid spadix which is covered with many small closely packed flowers. Conspicuously veined leaves emerge after the spathe and spadix, and grow to be one to two feet long.

Habitats: swamps and muddy ground

Phenology highlight: The mottled spathe grows into unique twisted forms and shelters the spadix with its tiny flowers. This is the first wildflower out in some areas.

Species facts

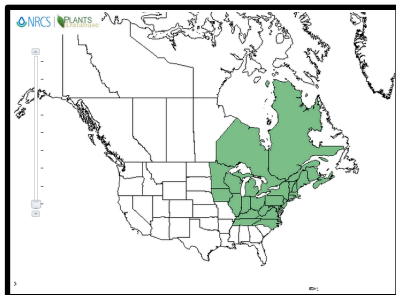
- The flowers of skunk cabbage are pollinated by flesh flies, carrion flies, and various gnats.
- Spiders often lurk inside the spathe to feed on insects that visit the flowers.
- Black bears and snapping turtles may eat the leaves when little else is available in early spring.
- Though the roots and the young unfurled leaves may be eaten if well cooked, the rest of the plant is toxic to people.



Photo credit: Rob Routledge, Sault College, Bugwood.org

Why observe this species? Skunk cabbage is one of the plant species observed by New York Phenology Project member organizations, and data gathered is contributed to the National Phenology Network database. The mission of this public participation in science research initiative is to educate and engage the public while collecting data that is useful for detecting broad scale patterns and changes in the natural world.

Tips for observing this species: The spadix emerges in mid to late winter, often while snow or ice remain on the ground, so begin to look for this species early in the year. **Do not tear open the spathe to observe flowers or fruits.**



Map credit: USDA, NRCS. 2014. The PLANTS Database <http://plants.usda.gov>. (02 June 2015). National Plant Data Team, Greensboro, NC 27401-4901 USA

For more information about phenology and the New York Phenology Project (NYPP), please visit the NYPP website (www.nyphenologyproject.org) and the USA-NPN website (www.usanpn.org).

Skunk Cabbage (*Symplocarpus foetidus*)

Note: fruit phenophases are nested so you may need to record more than one phenophase for each; for example, if you record **Y** for "ripe fruits" you should also record **Y** for "fruits."



Joy Viola
Northeastern University
Bugwood.org

Initial Growth New green tips of skunk cabbage leaves emerge next to one or more spathes. Growth is considered "initial" until the first leaf has fully unfolded.



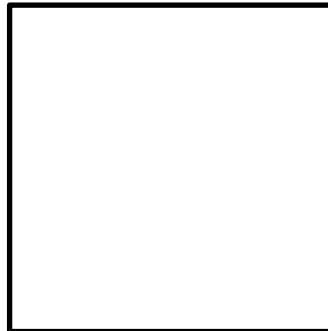
Rob Routledge
Sault College, Bugwood.org

Leaves One or more live, fully unfolded leaves are visible. For seedlings, do not count the small, round or elongated leaves (cotyledons) found on the stem almost immediately after the seedling sprouts. Do not include fully dried or dead leaves.



David Cappaert
Michigan State University
Bugwood.org

Flowers or flower buds For skunk cabbage, watch for the presence of the mottled purple spathe, which contains and hides the flowers. **Please do not tear open the spathe to look for the individual flowers.**

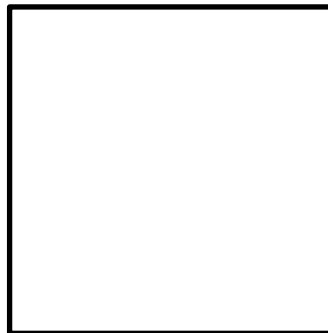


Fruits The fruit is a fleshy berry, crowded with many other berries in an egg-shaped cluster found inside the spathe. Fruits change from white to rosy-purple to red-brown to brown-black.



© Mike Cornell

Ripe Fruits For skunk cabbage, a fruit is considered ripe when the fruit-covered spadix has turned brown-black. The spadix is often found on the ground at the base of the leaves when fruits are ripe.



Recent Fruit or Seed Drop One or more mature fruits or seeds have dropped or been removed from the plant since your last visit. Do not include obviously immature fruits that have dropped before ripening.



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Adaptation for Early Blooming The spathe can quickly emerge in late winter because of heat produced by the plant's respiration. Heat protects developing flowers from freezing and dying. Skunk cabbage can warm itself to nearly 60°F!



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Adaptations for Pollination The carrion-like appearance of its spathe and its decaying flesh odor attract its pollinators: flesh flies, carrion flies, and gnats.

All phenophases pictured here