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Skunk Cabbage

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As I drive on back country roads, I see a strange plant growing in low lying, wet, marshy areas. I think that it's Skunk Cabbage, but I'm not sure. It grows in massive groups and has big, tall light green leaves. Is it Skunk Cabbage? And if so, does it have any medicinal properties?

Yes, I've seen this plant too, and it's quite a sight to behold! It grows in moist or wet sites such as marshes, bogs and swamps from Minnesota to the Eastern coast and from the Carolinas to New England. There are many species of this plant, but the more common ones are *Symplacarpus foetidus* and *Lysichiton americanum*. Both are 'aroids', members of the 'Araceae' family, which also includes the Jack-in-the Pulpit , and over 3,000 other species of plants. All species exhibit variations of a lily-like appearance, i.e., the protruding spadix (the finger-shaped part that bears the flowers and seeds), and the hood-like covering, or spathe.

Skunk Cabbage (*Symplacarpus foetidus*): *Symplacarpus* is from the Greek words for 'connection ' and 'fruit', descriptive of the closely clustered balls of

red berries that appear in late summer. The species name, *foetidus*, is a Latin specific name which refers to this plant's "fetid" odor. In other words, it STINKS! Hence, some of its common names are Skunk Weed, Pole-cat Weed, and Swamp Cabbage.

Growing along streams and in marshy areas, they are one of the first spring wild flowers to bloom, appearing as early as February or March before their leaves are visible. They provide much needed pollen for bees until the early tree blossoms appear. I, myself, have never seen this flower as I mistakenly assumed that it came in bloom after the leaves appeared, as is the case with most other wild flowers. But, next year for sure I'll be out there in February looking for them. If you are also curious about this wild flower, here's what to look for: tiny, perfect, ill-smelling, greenish-yellow to purplish-brown florets, thickly scattered over a rounded, fleshy spadix hidden within a purplish-brown, usually mottled spath, a hood-like covering. The leaves are 'cabbage-like' and not as tall as the species below.

Lysichiton americanum: The name Lysichiton has its roots in the Greek "*lysis*", which means loosening and "*chiton*", which means tunic. It refers to the shedding of the yellow sheath-leaf that surrounds the flower cluster. This species' flower also has a strong skunky scent, but the leaves do not. In fact, in identifying it today (I could only find the leaves, as the flowers are long gone), I bruised one of the leaves, which are tall, slender and a beautiful bright green, and to me it had a fresh onion-like smell. The flowers, which also appear in February and March resemble shining yellow lanterns with a central column, called a spadix (packed with tiny flowers), and an encircling yellow sheath leaf called a spathe.

The leaves of *L. Americanum* were used by the American Indian for lining baskets and cooking pits, as they contain calcium oxalate crystals, a property that makes them very strong. The roots of both species were used as a medicine for such conditions as asthma and bronchitis, and externally as a poultice to draw out splinters and thorns, and for healing all outward wounds (works to stop bleeding).

Today Skunk Cabbage is still used primarily as an expectorant for whooping cough, asthma and bronchitis. Less common, it is used to treat epilepsy, hysteria, headaches, vertigo and rheumatic problems.

The part used (for a tincture) is the rhizome (root), and not the leaves as they contain those long calcium oxalate crystals, which when eaten become embedded in mucous membranes, causing intense irritation and burning. However, if you are starving while out in the woods, and Skunk Cabbage leaves are the only thing there is to eat, cooking them in water three separate times, throwing out the water and using new water each time will make them edible.

Skunk Cabbage contains a volatile oil, *serotonin (5HT)*, amines, amino acids, ammonia, indole and resins. *Serotonin* is the neurotransmitter, which when it is imbalanced, is believed to be responsible for mental conditions such as depression. As mentioned above, this herb is used for treating "hysteria", an old term for "emotional instability". Skunk Cabbage was listed in the U.S. Pharmacopoeia and is still in the U.S. Dispensatory as having the following medicinal properties: emetic, stimulant, antispasmodic and narcotic.

Although this weed is most interesting, I would not use it, because most of my research has a CAUTION: Handling fresh skunk cabbage may cause the skin to blister. Excessive doses can induce nausea, headaches, and/or dizziness.