

SPECIES SPOTLIGHT

Look for it now in Southwest Ohio!

2/6/2021



"Eastern Skunk Cabbage - *Symplocarpus foetidus*, Julie Metz Wetlands, Woodbridge, Virginia" by Judy Gallagher is licensed under CC BY 2.0



"Skunk-cabbage flowers" by NatureServe is licensed under CC BY 2.0

Skunk Cabbage (*Symplocarpus foetidus*)

By Shannon Pennington

One of the earliest blooming plants in Ohio, eastern skunk cabbage can be found in woodlands, wetlands, and near springs or streams. It is considered to be an early harbinger of spring.

Even when the ground is still frozen, this tenacious plant manages to push its way through the soil using a unique trait: it is thermogenic, meaning it produces its own heat, melting any snow around it, and allowing it to emerge and even bloom during periods of frigid temperatures.

In our region, we typically see this plant from early February (flowers) through May (leaves), so take a walk in the woods and see if you can spot any. As a famous naturalist observed in the passage below, it is a good reminder that warmer, sunnier days are on the way!

"If you are afflicted with melancholy at this season, go to the swamp and see the brave spears of skunk-cabbage buds already advanced toward a new year... See those green cabbage buds lifting the dry leaves in that watery and muddy place. There is no can't nor cant to them. They see over the brow of winter's hill. They see another summer ahead."
~Henry David Thoreau

To learn more about this species, visit <https://ocvn.osu.edu/news/eastern-skunk-cabbage-early-sign-spring>

FUN FACTS

- Despite its name, it is not a cabbage at all! Rather, it is closely related to a wildflower we see later in spring, the Jack-in-the-Pulpit.
- The flower appears before the leaves and is made up of a hooded structure called a spathe and a fleshy spike called a spadix.
- It produces an unpleasant scent when the leaves are disturbed.
- It is pollinated by flies and carrion beetles, which are attracted to its heat and pungent odor.
- Native Americans and pioneers used it for medicinal purposes, believing that it cured headaches and respiratory ailments.
- Evidence suggests it has been around for over 72 million years!