



# MONTEREY NEWS

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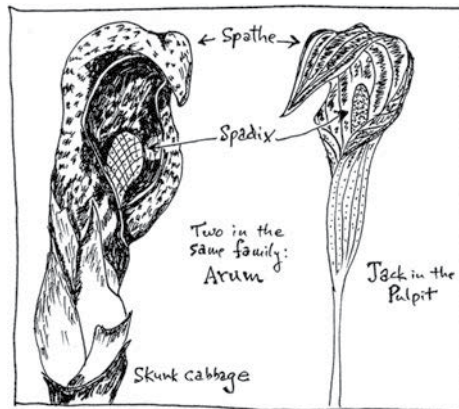
## Skunk Cabbage in the Swamps

Two months ago the first flowers of spring were well along in the wet places. These were the skunk cabbage spathes, maroon with yellow-green spots. The spathe is a kind of protective hood over the spadix inside, and on the spadix are the flowers. They are very small, and like everything else about this skunk (or polecat) plant, they have a fetid odor. The plant has many names, and the Latin one is *Symplocarpus foetidus*. The first word is based on the idea that the many ovaries combine to make a single fruit. And the second word is one we know, fetid.

Inside that colorful sheath or spathe, the little flowers are lined up and down the spadix. Not only do they smell attractive to bees and carrion flies, but inside the spathe a visiting insect can warm up when it's cold outside. This is not just because the spathe makes a windbreak. The skunk cabbage or polecat weed is one of a small group of thermogenic plants thanks to something called "cyanide resistant cellular respiration."

In high school biology class we all had to learn the Krebs cycle and hang onto it until after the quiz. By now most of us are free of these details, if we ever got a firm grip on them in the first place. Adding in about four other steps in the way cells gobble down sugar and produce energy, the skunk cabbage can maintain a temperature of 71.6 °F, as long as the air temperature is above freezing. When it is near freezing outside, little flies can go into the spathe and warm up, then fly out again for more adventures.

In his Journal, Henry Thoreau writes in early March 1853, "I see the skunk cabbage springing freshly, the points of the spathes just peeping out of the ground." Ten days later he found the spathes "quite conspicuous" though not unrolled or opened yet. Then, the next week, the spathes were open half an inch. He heard bees in the skunk



cabbage patch and commented, "It is lucky this flower does not flavor their honey."

People have found ways to eat skunk cabbage, and I notice that you can buy various tinctures of this plant to help with some ailments. There is a very big root, or rhizome, which native people and others have dug up and made into flour. My old edible plants book says also, "The young tuft of leaves makes a not wholly unpalatable vegetable," but you have to "boil in several waters and serve with butter and vinegar or some other sauce."

Bears love to eat skunk cabbage leaves in the spring. Some other names for the plant are bear's foot, bear's leaf, and bear's root. Another is devil's tobacco and in 1723 a colonial botanist sent a sample back to London to a colleague, writing "I dried and smoaked some on't but it stunk so wretchedly as to make me spew; but the Indians have a way of dressing it so as to make it less hideous."

Our local swamp cabbage is anything but hideous just now, with great big leaves growing in a bunch from the ground. The plants occur not singly but in clumps, and if you wade in among them you may find the short spathe and fruit collapsed onto the ground right next to the tall bouquet of leaves. The spathe is withered now so the

fruits are visible, packed closely together. This has been called a brown mass, but to me they are arranged in a geometry that is handsome.

In Monterey, there is a glorious green skunk cabbage garden along New Marlborough Road. Walk, or drive slowly, to the first low point south from Route 23. There is a pasture on the right, a brook under the road, and a swamp filled with these cabbages on the left. Tim and Grace Burke once lived next to it but they are gone now and so is their house. The skunk cabbage patch remains, full of life. — Bonner McAllester