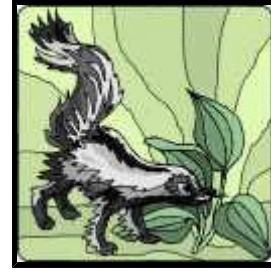
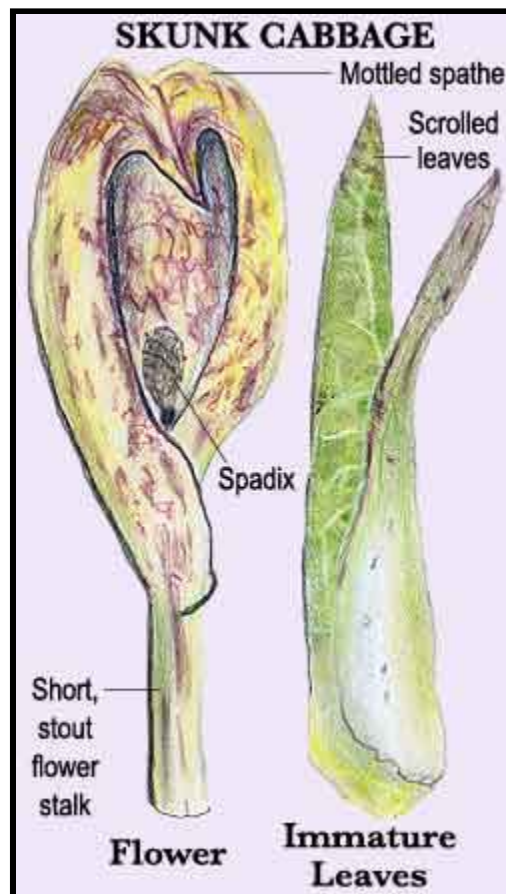


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Skunk Cabbage *(Symplocarpus foetidus)*



From *SHOOTS AND GREENS
 OF EARLY SPRING
 in Northeastern North America*



Skunk Cabbage, Young Leaves and Flower

The flower is hooded, and the emerging leaves are wrapped like a scroll.

DESCRIPTION: This entire plant smells like a skunk when injured (hence the specific name, foetidus=stinking)ógreat to show kids, always eager to be repulsed!



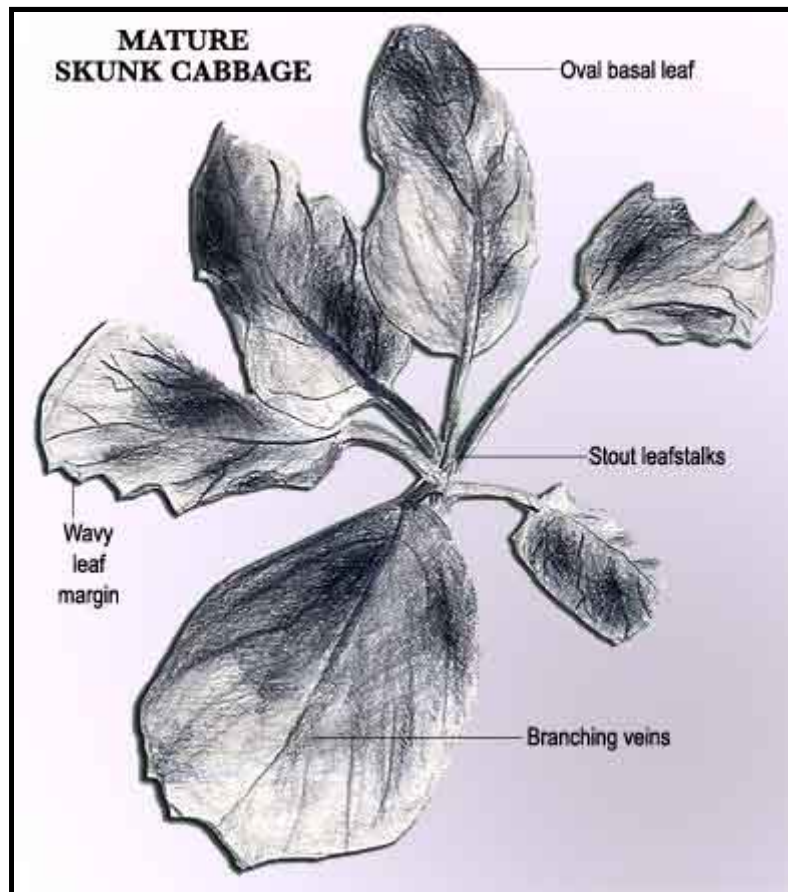
The flower, which appears in late winter *before* the leaves, features a stalked, elliptoid, pale pink *spadix* (the reproductive part) about 1 inch long, studded with small yellow flowers, and partially shielded by a mottled, purple and green, long-oval *spathe*, 3 to 6 inches tall. It generates enough heat to melt the surrounding snow, while the odor attracts the year's first flies to this heated haven. They mate there and pollinate the flowers.

The smooth-edged, long-oval to heart-shaped leaves come up in March (sometimes also in late fall, when they don't complete their development). First wrapped like scrolls, they grow 1-1/2 to 3 feet tall and 1 to 2 feet long.

In mid-summer and fall, an inconspicuous, low, flattened, green, egg-shaped fruit, 2 to 3 inches across, its surface convoluted like a brain, appears in the mud, turning black as it matures. Inside, a circle of 10 to 14 roughly globular seeds lines the periphery.

Caution: Deadly [false hellebore](#) (*Veratrum viride*) superficially resembles skunk cabbage, and the plants often grow side by side. Odorless, false hellebore leaves look pleated, with prominent parallel veins, while skunk cabbage's inconspicuous veins branch.

The leaves, which appear in early spring (they sometimes also appear in late fall, but don't complete their development) are first wrapped like a scroll.



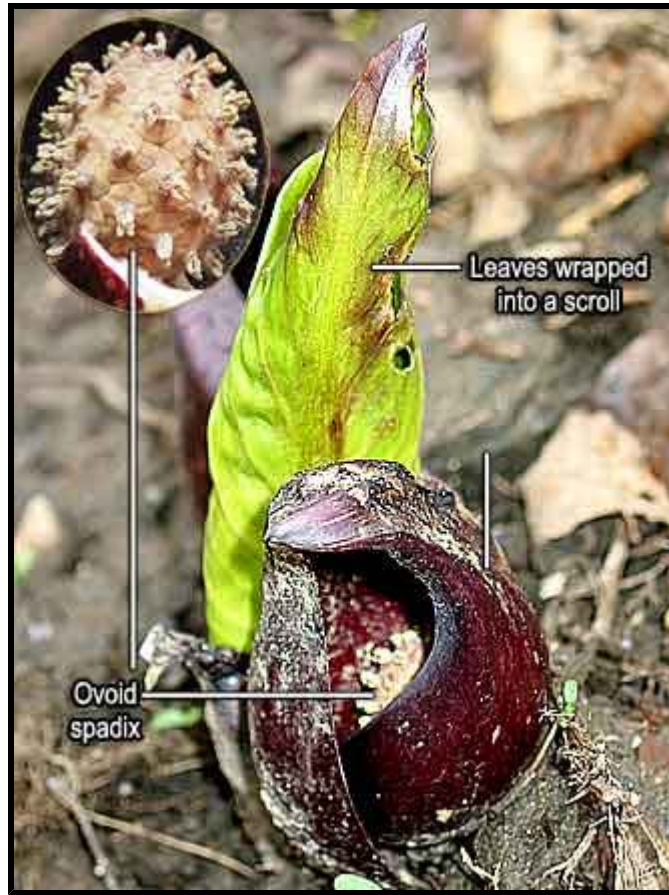
HABITAT: Skunk cabbage grows in large, dense stands in wet woods and swamps. And it grows in a certain area in eastern Asia too. Even though the 2 populations have been separated for 6 to 8 million years, the plants' forms are identical, and they interbreed readily. For a long time, biologists couldn't figure out why they didn't evolve into 2 different species incapable of interbreeding in all that time.

It turns out that once a new species comes into existence, it remains unchanged for millions of years, through ice ages and hot climates, until it finally goes extinct. New species may branch off and evolve from an isolated pocket population of the parent species in as few as tens of thousands of years, only to continue unchanged for millions of years as well. And the stagnation of skunk cabbage in Asia and America (it does grow in swamps after all) supports this take on the scale of evolution's operation, and explains the conundrum.

After I identified skunk cabbage once by a swamp, a member of my expedition got very excited and plunged into the muck after it. The owner of a well-known New York City herb and spice shop, he hadn't been able to obtain the root, which his customers were demanding, from his suppliers.

The rest of us continued on, soon finding more skunk cabbage growing on dry land. But as the tour ended and we passed the swamp again on the way out, the store owner was still rolling in the mud, trying to wrestle out the skunk cabbage roots. I imagine he's still there, struggling, to this very day!

The moral: look around to find the best spot, where you won't have to sort out grass and twigs, deal with poison ivy, or dive into a swamp, *before* collecting!



SEASON: You may try using skunk cabbage leaves in March and early April, but after reading further, you may not want to!

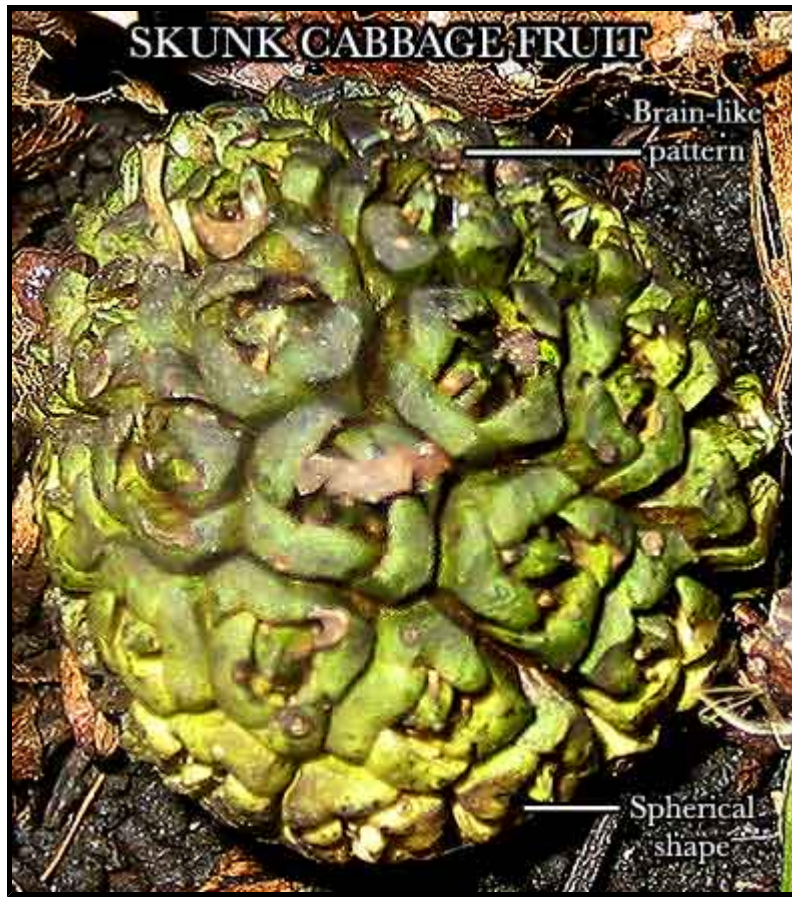


FOOD USES: Marginally edible at best, skunk cabbage contains calcium oxalate crystals, which cause the most unpleasant burning sensation of the mouth and tongue. Boiling doesn't dispel this quality. I once dried young skunk cabbage leaves in a food dehydrator for a week, following instructions from Lee Peterson's *Field Guide to Edible Wild Plants*. Then I simmered them with lots of other vegetables, tomatoes, spices, and beans, making chili. I finally dispelled the calcium oxalate crystals from the skunk cabbage—unfortunately, they went into my mouth!

After cursing out Peterson for an hour before the burning and stinging of my tongue and mouth, caused by one bite (which I quickly spat out), subsided, I flushed the entire recipe down the toilet, and the plumbing's never been the same since!

I include skunk cabbage in this book only to head off foragers who've been misinformed about its edibility and insist on trying it. If you must use this plant, air-dry it for 6 months, after which it tastes like paper, a vast improvement!

Conclusion: The day you bring home skunk cabbage is the night to go out for dinner—and if you do find skunk cabbage, leave it for the skunks!

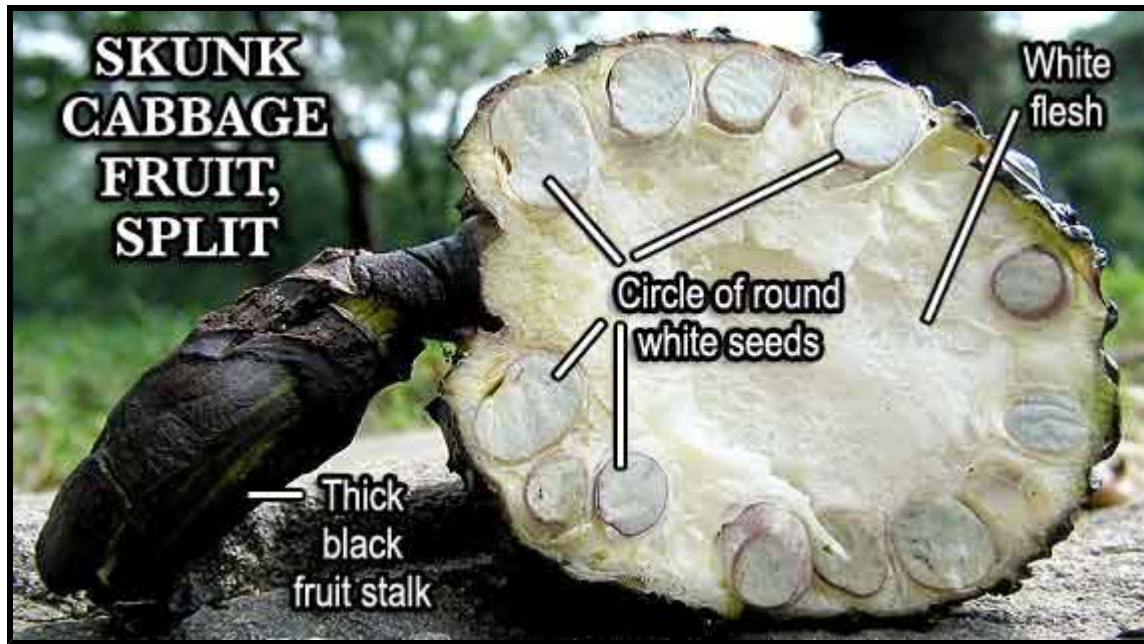


Skunk Cabbage Fruit

The green and black, ovate, blocky fruit is easily overlooked.

MEDICINAL USES: An ointment made by boiling skunk cabbage roots in oil is said to be good for ringworm (a fungal infection of the skin), as well as sores and swellings.

I'd be willing to try this plant externally, but I'll let someone else swallow the tea made from the roots or seeds first. Such an infusion is supposedly antispasmodic, *diaphoretic* (inducing sweating and stimulating the immune system), and expectorant (bringing up phlegm), and it reputedly acts as a narcotic for asthma. It's supposed to be good for arthritis, chorea, hysteria, edema, whooping cough, worms, epilepsy, and convulsions in pregnancy and labor (the Iroquois would pass the seeds over female genitals to bring on childbirth). I doubt that all these claims could be verified scientifically.



Skunk Cabbage Fruit, split lengthwise.

The oval seeds grow close to the fruit's surface

FEATURED RECIPE: [Skunk Cabbage Booty](#)

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