

Amorphophallus titanum

[Synonyms : *Amorphophallus selebicus*]

GIANT AROID is a perennial. Native to the equatorial rainforests of Sumatra (now an Indonesian island) it has a solitary, about 20 foot high, huge umbrella-like leaf and, periodically, a very strongly fetid-smelling, gigantic inverted bell-shaped, purplish-brown flower (spathe) that is pale yellow on the outside with a huge pale yellow central spike (spadix) of minute flowers.

It is also known as Corpse flower, Giant arum, *Ju mo yu* (Chinese), *Kidaram* (Singhalese), Titan arum, Titanum arum, and *Zmijovec titánský* (Czech).

The plant can live for 40 years during which time it can flower for a very few days on two or three occasions. The thousands of minute flowers (for a botanist, the actual flowers) on the very large spike are normally pollinated by a species of carrion beetle (and other insects) that is attracted by the atrocious smell. Some authorities claim that pollination is also provided by elephants when they drink water that has collected in the flower-like spathe. The golden pollen brushes on their foreheads and is then transferred from there to female flowers which then produce bright red berries.

Titanium means ‘very large’ with reference to the flower spike.

Giant aroid was discovered by an Italian naturalist, Dr. Adoardo Beccari (1843-1920) in the Padang Province of Sumatra (now an Indonesian island) in 1878. Its size was such that transportation to ‘civilization’ was something of a feat, and Dr. Beccari is understood to have described in his notes how it took two men to carry one plant slung between them. (The weight could have been a struggle too as, although far less after flowering, the tubers increase in weight to as much as 75 lb. by the time the plant is in bloom.) Despite such difficulties however it must have been introduced to Europe quite quickly as authorities note that a giant aroid, cultivated from seed sent by Dr. Beccari, first bloomed at the Botanic Gardens in Kew in England, in 1881.

Its massive flower would seem always to attract much attention from sightseers especially when it blooms outside its native habitat. Apparently the smell has not deterred many although it is claimed that when it was first seen in Europe some visitors fainted from it and arrangements were sometimes made for viewing the plant from outside the glasshouse in which it was growing. It is reported that visitors flocked to marvel at the strange and enormous ‘flower’ – at Kew in 1881 and 1889 in Hamburg (Germany) at roughly the same time and then in 1937 in North America at the New York Botanic Gardens. Another opportunity to see it flowering at Kew occurred in 1963 and again most recently on 30th August 1996. On this occasion warning of the impending event and its accompanying appalling smell was given by the BBC on the national news that day. Then the publicity surrounding the giant aroid at the University of Wisconsin in 2001 took advantage of the existence of the Internet, as well as more traditional promotional material ranging from posters to tee-shirts. It documented the plant’s progress (it reached a height of 8 ft. 5 in.) and its cross-pollination with one from Florida until the ‘flower’s’ collapse on the 11th June.

Authorities noted that the pseudo-flower can be 4-6 ft. wide and the central spike can reach a height of 8 ft.. It is reported that botanists at Kew noted in 1889 that the ‘flower’ grew in

height by 3 in. each day and when fully open (a process that took 3-4 days) it only lasted for about 6 hours.