

Lysichiton americanus

[Synonyms : *Lysichiton camtschatcensis*, *Lysichiton kamtschatcense*]

YELLOW SKUNK CABBAGE is a perennial. Native to western North America it has long, dense unpleasant-smelling, yellowish-green spike (spadix) shielded by a large, petal-like, bright yellow spathe.

It is also known as American skunkcabbage, *Amerikanischer Stinktiera Kohl* (German), *Amerikansk skunkkalla* (Swedish), *Aronskelk* (Dutch), Boga arum, *Gul skunkkalla* (Swedish), Meadow cabbage, *Scheinkalla* (German), Skunk cabbage, *Skunkkalla* (Swedish), Skunk weed, Swamp cabbage, Western skunk cabbage, and Yellow arum.

Warning – this perennial contains poisons that can be neutralised by careful cooking or drying. (If it is consumed untreated the poison is said to cause the feeling of a multitude of needles being poked into the mouth and all other parts of the body that it passes through.)

This perennial is pollinated by bees and a particular kind of beetle attracted by the plant's unpleasant smell.

Americanus means 'of or from America (North or South)'.

The plant has provided food for some North American Indian tribes. The Tolowa Indians ate the boiled root hearts (boiled eight times) and the Yurok and Quileute tribes also ate the cooked root. For the latter and the Hesquiat Indians the leaves offered a savoury flavouring, while the Skokomish steamed them as a vegetable – and authorities have noted that the Cowlitz tribe ate the cooked flowers.

Some of the Indian tribes observed that bear, deer and elk eat skunk cabbage flower stalks, leaves, fruit and roots.

Records describe how the plant seems to have provided a toy for Kitasoo Indian children. They spiked the spadices (the flower spike) on sticks and vied with each other on how far these could be thrown.

Skunk cabbage charcoal was valued by Thompson Indians. They believed this gave them protection from witchcraft.

Perhaps the most versatile part of the plant however is its huge musky-smelling, glossy green leaves. Apart from superstitious connotations for the Quileute tribe (they placed them under their canoe bows as they believed this made seals easier to catch) many practical purposes were found for them especially to do with food and cooking. Hoh and Bella Coola Indians folded them into containers for storing fruit – or where the Nitinaht tribe was concerned leftover food. Cups and plates were shaped out of the leaves by the Samish, Oweekeno, Bella Coola, Swinomish, Salish and Nitinaht Indians, while cooking food could be wrapped with them by the Hoh, some of the Kwakiutl, the Hanaksiala, Quileute, Haisla, Tsimshian, Tolowa and Yurok tribes. Makah, Okanagan-Colville, Bella Coola, Nitinaht and some of the Kwakiutl tribes also used leaves to cover cooking food, and they served the Tsimshian, Hesquiat and Makah Indians as mats for drying berries.

Skunk cabbage was a source of medicine for many North American Indian tribes including the Kwakiutl, Quinault, Shuswap, Makah and Hesquiat. From records it would appear to have been especially useful externally. It was applied to burns by the Hesquiat, Hanaksiala, Nitinaht and Haisla Indians. The Skokomish and Quileute tribes used it for cuts, while the Kwakiutl and Klallam tribes treated carbuncles with it, and the Kwakiutl

and Gitksan Indians valued it for healing boils. The Klallam and Shuswap tribes applied it to sores. Quileute Indians seem to have prescribed it for treating some female disorders, and the Makah Indians used the plant for carrying out abortions. It was taken by the Bella Coola for some stomach disorders – and by the Gitksan for influenza. Urinary problems were treated with it by the Quinault, Haisla and Hanaksiala tribes, and the Skokomish and Quileute Indians turned to it for easing fever and headaches. It could be part of tuberculosis treatment in the Klallam tribe, and the Makah Indians chose it for both lung problems and blood disorders. The Yurok and Tolowa tribes used it in remedies for easing the effects of a stroke, it was taken by the Gitksan and Thompson Indians to counter nightmares, and rheumatic remedies could include its use in the Tolowa, Makah, Cowlitz, Yurok and Gitksan tribes.

Locally the underground stems are cooked as a vegetable – and the leaves are also eaten once they have been prepared like spinach (*Spinacia oleracea*).

Today American skunk cabbage is often cultivated as an ornamental waterside plant. At the beginning of the 21st Century, as a garden escape, it has begun to be invasive in some Scottish wetland and water systems.

Medicinally, the leaves have been used locally in poultices.