

Symplocarpus foetidus

[Synonyms : *Dracontium foetidum*, *Spathyema foetida*]

SKUNK CABBAGE is a perennial. Native to north-eastern Asia and to eastern North America it has a spike (spadix) of many small dark purple flowers hooded by a leaf-like, purple-brown (mottled with yellow) shield (spathe).

It is also known as Bear's foot, Bear's leaf, Bear's root, Byron-blad, Byron-ritter, Clumpfoot cabbage, Collard, Cow collard, Dractonium, Ellebore, Fetid hellebore, Foetid pothos, Hellebore, Irish cabbage, Meadow cabbage, Midas ears, Parson-in-the-pillory, Poke, Poke weed, Polecat collard, Polecat weed, Polkweed, Rockweed, Skunkweed, Stink cabbage, Swamp cabbage, and *Zazen-sou* (Japanese).

The plant's fetid skunk-like smell attracts pollinating insects from many miles away. The heat generated from its rapid growth in late Winter can be sufficient to melt any surrounding ice or snow.

The minute flowers are pollinated by bees.

Warning – skunk cabbage can affect the central nervous system and must only be used by a qualified practitioner. The plant can cause nausea, vomiting, headache, vertigo, impaired vision, intense burning and irritation in the mouth (usually sufficient to prevent swallowing which could in turn cause violent gastroenteritis) and death. Handling the fresh plant can cause blistering.

Foetidus is Latin (stinking) meaning 'bad-smelling, fetid or stinking'.

Some of the North American Indian tribes ate the roots fried, roasted or baked. The young leaves and shoots were also boiled and eaten by the Iroquois tribe as a vegetable.

Authorities have noted one unusual use for skunk cabbage. The Iroquois tribe believed that the use of an infusion of powdered root, applied like a kind of soap, could neutralize underarm smells.

Skunk cabbage was used by North American Indian tribes including the Meskwaki and Malecite as a medicine. For example the Menominee applied a poultice of powdered root to wounds (as did the Iroquois) and they also used the same powder as a treatment for cramp and as a medicinal flavouring. Iroquois Indians used the plant to treat some female problems, and it was also used by the Menominee for treating heart disorders and convulsions (in both adults and children) The Delaware tribe turned to it as a remedy for whooping-cough, and coughs generally were treated with it by the Chippewa. The Iroquois also used it in the treatment of tuberculosis, and it was a Nanticoke cure for colds. It was an ingredient in a Micmac remedy for headaches, and both the Mohican and Delaware tribes valued it as a treatment for epilepsy. Delaware Indians relied upon it to ease pain, the Meskwaki tribe used it for toothache, and the Iroquois, Meskwaki and Abnaki Indians all turned to it for treating rheumatism.

The powdered root was one of several ingredients (including various coloured dyes and other medicines) that were used by many of the Indian tribes in tattooing. Unlike some of the other tribes however the Menominee are said normally to have tattooed their bodies only as a medicinal charm. They drew the tattoo over the pain centre with a fish tooth that had been dipped in the appropriate moistened powder – and the colours left when the medicine had dispersed guarded against the return of the illness.

Europe first learnt of skunk cabbage from North America in the early 19th Century. Medicinally, it was used to treat asthma, catarrh, rheumatism, fluid retention, convulsions during pregnancy or labour, ringworm and epilepsy. Today it is used mainly in the treatment of bronchitis and asthma.