

Nature on Trail »

Beacons in the Marsh

It's early spring. The world is slate gray, black and white. You yearn for a hint of green, a bit of color. You study the swollen buds of deciduous trees and examine your sleeping garden beds for signs of life.

Worry not, hiker! Spring comes early to the woodland wetlands, in the form of the delightful skunk cabbage. It's an easy plant for the hiker to spot. As early as March, depending on the elevation, it pokes through patches of snow and ice in soggy, damp areas. First to emerge is a greenish stalk covered in tiny flowers, surrounded by a cheery yellow leaflike bract. With this bright bract, the plant has earned another common name, swamp lantern, conjuring images of a light leading the unwary into the muck. More descriptive is the scientific name, *Lysichiton americanus*, which broadly translated means "loose tunic" and also refers to the bright yellow bract that cloaks the flower spike.

This is only part of the show; the true leaves, which are green, emerge next. Its flower eventually dies back after producing reddish berries, while its leaves continue to grow all summer, becoming huge—as much as 3 or more feet long and a foot wide.

If you have ever taken the time to examine a skunk cabbage closely, you will notice a musky, but not altogether unpleasant, odor.



A skunk Cabbage emerging from the ground near Barclay Lake. Photo by Paul Raymaker

This odor, which can permeate a wetland, is thought to attract certain types of beetles, which eat the pollen, congregate for mating inside the bract, and ultimately pollinate the plant.

The skunk cabbage figured importantly in Native American heritage. While not widely consumed except as a starvation food, the huge leaves were used to line baskets and to wrap food for preservation or cooking. Wildlife from elk to bears are said to root out and eat the underground stem.

Surprisingly, as resilient as it seems, the skunk cabbage is difficult to transplant or grow in the garden setting. Perhaps this is just as well. When winter seems interminable, a promise of skunk cabbage encourages us to hit the wooded trails and search out that first cheerful yellow flicker of spring, rather than seek solace from the garden. Lush stands of skunk cabbage line many of the trails in Tiger and Cougar Mountains.

Skunk cabbage is tolerant of a variety of growing conditions. In early spring, search nearly any low-elevation wet area as the snow melts. Skunk cabbage can be found in damp areas to standing water, and will grow in full shade, though it is more exuberant in partial or full sun.♦

Profile by Sylvia Feder

Desperately Seeking Cabbage?

Try these trails, recommended by the WTA staff

"The first six miles of the **Snoqualmie Lake Trail** along Taylor River is a fantastic place for skunk cabbage. The trail is on an old road grade above the river and if you explore downhill and near the water you will find cabbages by the thousands." *Mike Stenger*

"Try **Lake 22**. I hiked there in the spring of 2009 (or maybe 2010), and I recall lots of skunk cabbages in the lower section. There was still snow on the upper trail, and we wore snowshoes for half of it though yak trax would have been sufficient." *Rebecca Lavigne*

"Best I've ever seen is at **Stuart Island** in the San Juans on the walk from Reid Harbor to the Turn Point Lighthouse at mile 1.5. A glorious display, but you do need a boat or plane to get there! This walk and the lighthouse views are among the most sublime in the San Juans. Truly extraordinary." *Brian Windrope*

