



REAWAKENING: LIFE FROM THE LAND

Phew! Must Be Spring

*Hot, smelly
skunk cabbage
heralds
the new
season*

Snow coats the path and ice still grips the bare branches of the hickory trees and clings to the broom sedge and the red hips of the swamp rose. Yet, I am searching for spring. And perhaps something more. I am a pilgrim in the woods on a winter day looking for nature's great design.

The truths of the natural world are immutable — part of a continuum, sometimes hidden but always there. Day into night, the ebb and flow of the tides, the cycle of the seasons. The marvelous manifestations of a force that goes on whether we notice or not.

I want to notice. I'm looking for skunk cabbage.

It adds to my quest that I am in the woods at Connetquot River State Park Preserve at the end of a winter that doesn't want to go away. The winter has been relentless — snow after snow, wind and icy rain. My spirit hungers for spring. And skunk cabbage is the first wildflower to appear in the marshy woodlands as the seasons shift. It's usually visible by the end of February. It's March now, and I have yet to see it. But I'm sure it's out there beneath the snow.

Thoreau called skunk cabbage "hermits of the bog," and others named it "the eye of spring." Most people would consider its botanical name, *Symplocarpus foetidus*, more fitting. *Foetidus* means evil smelling. Skunk cabbage stinks — some find its odor reminiscent of the animal it's named for, others detect the smell of rotting meat. But there's more to skunk cabbage than meets the nose. The eye of spring is something special and deserves notice.

Skunk cabbage is a rugged member of a cultivated clan. It belongs to the arum family, which includes the pious jack-in-the-pulpit, the graceful calla lilies, and the handsome dieffenbachia.

With plants, as with people, family members tend to be similar but different. I wouldn't carry skunk cabbage at my wedding as I did calla lilies, nor would I grow it indoors as I would dieffenbachia. But if I were a flower I'd be proud to have skunk cabbage as part of my lineage. Every family needs a wild thing, and skunk cabbage is a creature of the woods with a special talent. The plant transforms itself into a hothouse by generating its own heat, which gives it a head start

on other spring wildflowers.

It's all in the spadix or flower cluster, which is protected by a spongy false leaf called a spathe. This streaky brownish-purple hood curls around the knobby spadix, keeping the tiny greenish-white flowers warm and cozy and sheltering them from wind and rain. The plant creates its own heat through a complex process in which it uses oxygen and utilizes carbohydrates in its root system. And it seems to have a built-in thermostat. As soon as the air temperature moves above freezing, the amazing skunk cabbage starts keeping things toasty at 72 degrees.

The reason for all this is as elemental as the seasons themselves — certainly the season of rebirth that is about to unfold around us. Birds do it, bees do it — and yes, even skunk cabbage does it. Undeniably, skunk cabbage is hot. Early insects such as carrion beetles and flies are enticed by the plant's warmth,

its mottled maroon color that reminds them of raw meat, and its unmistakable eau de skunk. They come looking for food and a place to lay their eggs. And along the way, they romp around the spadix and pollinate the flowers. This early pollination gives the skunk cabbage plenty of time to produce the marble-sized seeds that take four months to germinate and five to seven years to grow into mature plants.

And so I tread through the park, skirting icy streams and deer scat and stopping to scratch the bark of spicebush and inhale its sweet smell. And all the while, I am longing for a far more pungent scent. Eventually, I see white-tailed deer gathered in a clearing beneath the pitch pines and catch a glimpse of a great blue heron flying above the trees. But what I want to see are the melting circles of snow that indicate the presence of a plant with an internal furnace.

Finally, near the trail's end, I spot the chunky chartreuse tips of the hermits of the bog poking up out of sphagnum moss in the muck of a red maple swamp. Nature never fails, I think. The tough green shoots — some of them four and five inches above the vanishing snow — attest to the continuum of our days. The eye of spring takes its place in the great design.

Within a month, the tobacco-like leaves of skunk cabbage will unfurl from a root thicker than a sweet potato and cover the swampy wetlands like a great, green blanket.

But for now, all I need to know is that when snow lingers, skunk cabbage calls to spring.

A Nature Journal



Irene Virag



Newsday Photo / Bill Davis

Skunk cabbage pushes through snow at Connetquot River State Park Preserve. The plant grows a single leaf-like sheath (a spathe) that protects the flowers.