

Kasey Hartz Natural Area Reference Sheet



Muskegon Community College

Symplocarpus foetidus (L.) Nutt. Skunk Cabbage

Araceae (Arum Family)

Blooming season:

Very early spring, even late winter, February
Through April.
Usually the first of the spring flowering plants.



Plant:

When in flower has only a small rosette of leaves.
Later in season 30.0 up to 100.0 cm tall.
Vaguely like an open headed cabbage plant.

Leaves:

Leaves extend growth as spathe withers, reaching 30.0 to 100.0 cm (more usually to 50 cm)
in length and 30.0 cm wide late in season.
Ovate/cordate in dense crowns, persisting into early fall.
When bruised, all parts of leaves have distinct “skunk” smell, stronger earlier in season.

Flower:

Tiny individual perfect, four-parted yellowish-white flowers cover a 2.5 cm diameter spadix.
Hooded fleshy spathe 7.5 - 15 cm high and 2.5 -
7.5 cm in diameter, brownish purple to greenish yellow in color, often mottled with deeper
brownish purple.
Spathe completely encloses spadix.
Flowers emit rotten odor attracting early flies.
Rapid growth generates enough heat to thaw soil
around it, and melt snow and ice above it.
Flowers are formed, underground, in the fall
(Rickett 1966 Part 1).



Can be confused with:

Rickett and Voss (1972) both state that this species can be confused with *Veratrum viride* Aiton (False Hellebore or Indian poke), and warn on that species being poisonous. Voss does state that although there are reports of that plant being found in southern Michigan, he located no specimens either in herbariums or the field.

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Geographic range:

Local: Riparian.

State: Common in lower Southern Peninsula, northward very local.

Regional: Quebec to Manitoba, south to Georgia, then west to Iowa. (Also found in Asia.)

Habitat:

Local: Riparian.

Regional: Low wet woods, ravines and hollows in beech-maple woods, floodplains, and bottomlands, etc. Voss (1972) reports that further north bogs and swamps are more likely.

Common local companions:

Mayapple, goldthread, *Lycopodium*, and spicebush.

Usages:

Human: Formerly the rhizome was used as a source of flour by Native Americans, after “suitable treatment”. Because of its early showing in spring, the leaves were also often used as greens after being cooked in several changes of water. Vogel (1970) cites earlier documents noting that Native Americans used it as an anti-spasmodic, a narcotic, an emetic, and for worms, as well as an expectorant; the dried roots were used for asthma. Millspaugh (1892, 1974, p. 680) cited late 19th Century use for a poultice for “caking *mammæ*”, and with “excellent success”.

Animal: Early season flies are reported to use the spathe as a warm resting spot (the same flies required by the plant for pollination). Bees are also very fond of it, both for the warmth offered and as an early food source.

Why is it called that?

Because the “ovaries grow together to make one fruit” (Smith 1963, 1997 p. 327), it was named *Symplocarpus*, *symploke* being the Greek for connection, and *karpus* for fruit. *Foetidus*, the Latin for stinking or bad smelling refers to the odor of all above ground plant parts.

Prepared by: Barbara Lukacs Grob December 2007