In Nature's Garden:

skunk cabbage

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Illustrated by Lucile Walton

The skunk cabbage is the first flower to bloom in Virginia woods in spring, so it occupies a special place in our floral calendar. While not exactly beautiful, it is an extraordinary and interesting plant.

Skunk cabbage, Symlocarpus foetidus, belongs to the Araceae or arum family. This is a small family of monocotyledons characterized by rather large, broad leaves which root directly in the ground. The flowers are small with no corolla (petals), sometimes a calyx of four to six sepals, and are clustered on a central stalk called a spadix, which is often covered by a leafy bract called a spathe. The fruit is a berry. The plants nearly always contain pungent juice which tends to make them bad-smelling. The aroids are world-wide, but the majority of them are confined to the tropics.

The intriguing shape of many of the Araceae have attracted a good deal of colorful nomenclature. Jack-in-the-pulpit is well known but skunk cabbage is also known as 'parson-in-the-pillory,' 'stinging cabbage' and 'devil's tobacco' (choi puant and tabac du diable in Quebec), 'midasears' and 'polecatweed.' The Latin name Symlocarpus merely refers to the formation of the fruit by coalescing or joining (sympleco - connection) of the carpels (carpos - fruit) and foetidus means just that - smelly.

The first part of the plant to appear is the spathe. This can be seen as early as late February, sometimes pushing up through ice or snow. The spathe is a large, leaf-like bract which rises out of the ground without a stalk. It encloses the spadix, a brown knob covered with brownish, insignificant little flowers. The flowers have four filamentous stamens, four slightly fleshy stamens and an angular style set on a tiny stigma. The spathe is usually dark red, spotted and blotched with yellowish-green and purple, and rolled in at the edges. Its color and rank odor attract the flies which are the chief pollinators of the plant. After flowering, the fruit develops as a spongy enlargement of the spadix enclosing the greenish berries.

The leaves appear with, or shortly after, the spathes, but initially are rolled into compact cones and are not very noticeable. However, later in the spring they unroll and shoot up to form a thick crown of broad leaves, bluntly pointed at the top and conspicuously veined. They have an entire margin and are set on short, deeply grooved stems.

The young leaves may be cooked and eaten as greens, however a very strong word of caution should be given on this. Skunk cabbage is often found in the same kinds of boggy places as Veratrum viride, Indian poke or false hellebore, which is a violent poison, and it is quite easy to confuse the leaves. A few years ago, a young man was brought into the University of Virginia Hospital after eating a little 'salad in the woods.' He was quite sick and when we were shown the plant he had eaten, identified it as Veratrum viride. My own inclination is to leave skunk cabbage entirely alone and go elsewhere for wild greens and bread. The plant is said to have been used as a remedy for asthma, catarrh, rheumatism and nervous hysteria, but I think it must have been administered as a sort of shock treatment and as such, has been rather rigorous to endure!

Symlocarpus is not all that common in the state, but it does frequent the bogs and swampy places of our piedmont and mountain areas. It is primarily a plant of northeastern America, being found only occasionally in high places in Georgia and Tennessee, but extending all the way north to Quebec and across to Manitoba.