Skunk Cabbage

By Patricia Whereat Phillips (Miluk Coos)

Skunk cabbage (*Lysichiton americanus),* which grows in mucky soils and marshes from northern California to Alaska, is one of the few members of the Arum (Araceae) family native to the Pacific Northwest. Its flowers (on the clublike stalk) and surrounding bright yellow spathe emerge as early as February, soon followed by the emergence of waxy dark green leaves. The flowers emit an odor that gives them their common name—not exactly skunklike, but strong and distinctive, which some people find unpleasant. On average, a skunk cabbage plant begins to set seed at five years of age and can live up to twenty years. The plants primarily reproduce by seed, which is dispersed by animals or running water.

Skunk cabbage was important to Indigenous people, who dug the roots and roasted them for food. Like taro and many other arums, skunk cabbage roots and leaves contain chemical compounds (oxalic acid) that cause severe pain to the mouth, but proper roasting breaks down these compounds. The roots can also be boiled, but require several changes of water. Indigenous people also used the large leaves to wrap foods and as a layer in earth ovens to help preserve moisture while foods cooked.

Some sources report that Native people regarded skunk cabbage as an emergency food, and some say that the roots were cherished. In an interview with linguist J. P. Harrington in 1942, Hanis Coos Elder Lottie Evanoff said that she very much liked skunk cabbage and found it curious that settlers did not eat it. “Bear eats skunk cabbage, is just crazy for it,” she said. “So it must be good eating, everything bear eats is good eating.”

Many Natives use the roots for medicine, as topical medicines to treat skin conditions and to treat respiratory diseases. For example, Beverly Ward wrote about her husband’s Lower Coquille grandmother, Susan Ned: “She kept a bunch of skunk cabbage and licorice [fern] roots on the wall in the kitchen. She put a big kettle of water on the stove and boiled the roots until the water boiled down, then she used the juice for colds and coughs.” Frances Talbot Elliot, my Miluk (South Slough Coos) great grandmother, used to grind up skunk cabbage roots, mix them with honey, and give a spoonful of the peppery medicine to children when they had a cold.

The importance of skunk cabbage also made an appearance in some Indigenous legends. On the lower Columbia and Willamette Rivers, the Kathlamet and Clackamas peoples had stories about skunk cabbage as an important food that kept people alive before the salmon first came to the rivers. In the Coosan Trickster cycle stories, the first Trickster learned how to cook skunk cabbage. He tried to eat it raw but spit it out. Then he put the root in hot ashes to cook. When it smelled sweet, he took it out. It tasted fine now, and so he said that is how human beings will cook it when they come into the world. Then he cut the root into many pieces and one at a time picked up a piece and put it down, each time saying, “Give this to your...” and naming a different kin name (mother, father, grandfather, and so on). In that way, he named familial relationships for the human beings to come in the world.

Skunk cabbage exudes a strong scent that attracts beetles as pollinators, and in ideal habitats the leaves can grow to be more than three feet long (150 centimeters). The tops of the plants die back in winter, but new waxy leaves emerge early in spring, along with a modified yellow leaf called a spathe. The clublike structure inside the spathe is the spadix and contains both male and female flowers. The roots are eaten by bears, elk, muskrats, and other animals. Other well-known members of the Arum family are the popular landscaping plant calla lily (*Zantedeschia aethiopica*) and the widespread Asian root vegetable taro (*Colocasia esculenta*). A distantly related species with the same common name of skunk cabbage, *Symplocarpus foetidus*, is native to parts of eastern Canada and the United States.

Climate change has been moving the time for flowering of many plant species earlier than their historical averages. Historically along the Oregon Coast, the bright yellow spathe and nascent spadex would begin emerging in February, and as late as April in colder climates such as Alaska. If its growth cycle is pushed significantly earlier into winter, the plant’s primary pollinators, rove beetles (Staphylinidae), may be negatively affected. Skunk cabbage produces its unique scent

specifically to attract these insects, and rove beetles use skunk cabbage as a location to reproduce, pollinating the plants in the process. Rove beetles are valuable as predators on many garden pests, such as thrips. The life cycle of many species of rove beetles takes from seventeen to twenty-one days. It is not yet entirely clear how climate change will affect the life cycle of rove beetles, but as the plants flower earlier there may be fewer of their pollinators available.

A more immediate impact may the availability of water that sustains skunk cabbage populations. Skunk cabbage requires mucky soils that are wet year-round. Climate change models predict several factors that will severely affect the Pacific Northwest: weather cycles tending toward more episodes of heatwaves, overall increasing average temperatures year-round, prolonged periods of drought, and hotter and more numerous wildfires. Intermittent flooding due to increasing weather extremes may affect the long-term stability and availability of the mucky habitats these plants require. These stresses may affect the growth and reproductive success of skunk cabbage even in areas where the soils remain wet.

Sources

Bown, Deni. *Aroids: Plants of the Arum Family.* Portland, Ore.: Timber Press, 2000.

Deur, Dougas. *Pacific Northwest Foraging.* Portland, Ore.: Timber Press, 2014.

Gunther, Ema. *Ethnobotany of Western Washington; The Knowledge and Use of Indigenous Plants by Native Americans.* Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1945.

Haskins, Leslie. *Wild Flowers of the Pacific Coast.* Portland, Ore.: Binfords and Mort, 1934.

Hymes, Dell. *Now I Know Only so Far: Essays in Ethnopoetics.* Norman: University of Nebraska Press, 2003.

Jacobs, Melville. *Coos Myth Texts.* Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1940.

Gunther, Erna. *Ethnobotany of Western Washington; The Knowledge and Use of Indigeneous Plants by Native Americans*. Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1945.

Haskin, Leslie. *Wild Flowers of the Pacific Coast.* Portland, Ore.: Binfords and Mort, 1934.

Moerman, Daniel. *Native American Ethnobotany.* Portland, Ore.: Timber Press, 1998.

Ward, Beverly H. *White Moccasins.* Myrtle Point, Ore.: Myrtle Point Printing, 1986.

Whereat Phillips, Patricia. *Ethnobotany of the Coos, Lower Umpqua, and Siuslaw Indians.* Corvallis: Oregon State Univ. Press, 2016.

The Oregon Encyclopedia

https://www.oregonencyclopedia.org/articles/skunk-cabbage/