

## VNPS Piedmont Chapter WILDFLOWER of the WEEK

### WILDFLOWER #96 answer: SKUNK CABBAGE (*Symplocarpus foetidus*)

In February, make a pilgrimage to wet ground to find this marvel in full bloom. Variably streaked lime green and maroon, 4 to 6 inches tall, the leafy spathe of skunk cabbage bends over the club-like spadix like a hooded monk. The rhizome produces heat, warming the spadix up to 11°F above air temperature, allowing the plant to melt its way upward. Shining and slippery, it sheds the mud and ice through which it rises. This ability to produce heat is shared with very few other plants.

Nestled within the outer spathe, the spadix is a dense pack of conjoined flowers. There are no petals, but first female then male reproductive parts stud the surface. Drawn by a faintly fetid scent of carrion, flies, beetles, gnats and bees enter this inner sanctum.

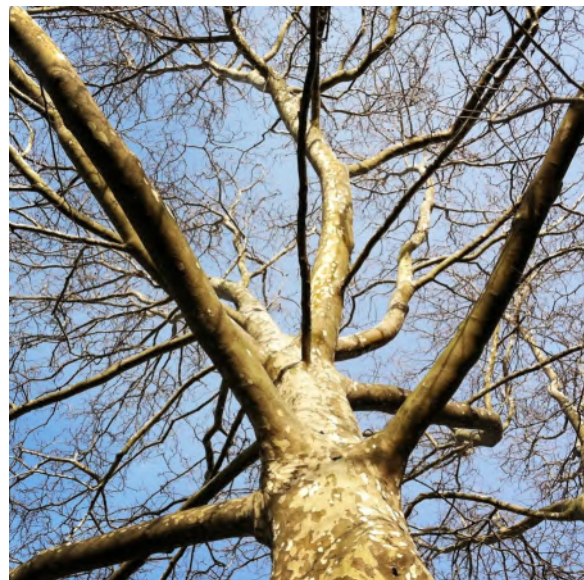
Pollinated, the spathe withers while the spadix elongates, eventually laying down its payload of compound hexagonal fruits in the mud, a foot away from the parent. Meanwhile an enormous rosette of vivid leaves unfurls, each up to 3 feet wide, hiding the fruits. Yellowthroats are known to nest underneath.

A protective skunk-like aroma pervades the leaves if you cut or crush them. They are also full of sharp calcium oxalate crystals, which burn the mouth and throat. Nonetheless, bears manage to eat young leaves and even partially dig out the stout, formidable taproots. Wood turtles can snake their necks into the spathe and eat the spadix. First nations used skunk cabbage as a remedy for cough and headache, and it was sold as the drug dracontium in the 1800s.

### WILDFLOWER #97

**Clues:** Find running water where you see this beacon shine.

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