

**Ode to the Skunk Cabbage**  
*Alison Robey, Kent Land Trust Correspondent*  
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No other month feels quite as long as March.

Even when I'm looking forward to the changing seasons, there's something lovely about most months that makes me reluctant to turn their calendar pages: the warm rain and bright flowers of May, the blinking fireflies and hazy sunsets of July, the swirling snow and cozy nights of January.

March? Not so much. Because March seems to be all about waiting.

By this month every year, I'm quite ready to be through with winter. I start feeling taunted by the approaching, but not-quite-here-yet, spring. Days are long again, but the air is still full of fog and lingering winter chills. The ground is warm enough for mud, but not warm enough to melt the last stubborn drifts of icy, mucky snow. I can smell spring in the air, but I can't enjoy it yet.

It's why March drags on and on: spring is just around the corner, but that corner feels unbearably far away. And regrettably, unless you're one of the lucky ones who hops on a plane to enjoy this in-between season in a different locale, there's no way on but through, and nothing for it but to wait – however impatiently – for the true warmth and color of spring to reach us.

Until then, the best remedy I've found for the seasonal malaise is an annual hunt for the first omens of the changing season. There are obvious ones in our own gardens – the first crocus blossoms, the first daffodil shoots, the first forsythia flowers – but the woods are rife with even earlier signs.

[Northern Cardinals](#) started singing again over a month ago. The boisterous blackbird flocks – [Red-Wing Blackbirds](#) with their buzzy *oak-a-lee* and [Common Grackles](#) with their raspy *reed-eak* – returned with the thawing of the river. Sugar Maple sap began flowing with the melting of the snow. [American Woodcocks](#) are [displaying on every warm evening](#).

For me, however, spring started with the Skunk Cabbages.

You've likely encountered Eastern Skunk Cabbage (*Symplocarpus foetidus*) before, even if you have yet to fully appreciate its beauty. They're a common plant throughout eastern North America, flourishing across shallow wetlands, in roadside ditches, and on moist wooded slopes. Throughout the summer, their vibrant green leaves carpet any boggy habitat you can find, and they are notorious for their odor – I'll let you guess what they smell like – when any of those big leaves gets damaged.



This time of year, however, they're a bit more subtle. Like many early spring plants, they bloom first and leaf out later, so it's their odd conch shell-like flowering structures you can see in the muck and ice of the March thaw. This mottled purple-green shell – known in technical botanical terms as a 'spathe' – hides within it a stubby, bulb-like cluster of stinky yellow flowers.

I'll admit, it's not the most attractive plant at first glance. But things start to get pretty cool when you learn about its ecology.

First off, why is it so ugly, stinky, and short? Why, to attract beetles, of course! Skunk cabbages have different pollinators than most garden flora. The perfumy nectar, showy petals, and bright colors of the flowers we favor in our landscaping – Black-Eyed Susans, Cardinal Flowers, Canada Lilies – are perfect for attracting the butterflies and hummingbirds who pollinate them. Skunk Cabbages are just as specialized, but they've got different customers. They bloom so early in the spring that most bees and moths aren't active yet, so their low-to-the-ground, flesh-colored flowers (complete with a distinctively rotten odor) are built instead to attract beetles searching for carrion.

If you're not a fan of that – though I can't imagine why you wouldn't be – ask yourself a different question: how can they flower so much earlier than our other plants? Skunk cabbages have been flowering since February; the next native plants to start blooming – wind-pollinated Red Maples and hazelnuts, and soon our earliest spring ephemerals (Trout Lilies! Dutchman's Breeches! Round-lobed Hepatica!) – don't flower until early April, because for now, the weather is simply too unpredictably cold.



Skunk Cabbage flowers poking through a hole melted into the snow, photographed with an phone camera (left) and a thermal imaging scope (right); hotter areas are shown in brighter colors. One cluster of flowers is visible as the bright yellow oval in the middle of the largest spadex.

The successful winter flowers of the Skunk Cabbage are the clever combination of two bizarre strategies: thermogenesis and defensive crystals. Skunk Cabbages can actually produce their own heat through an altered metabolic process, making them something of a “warm-blooded” plant. This process, only employed for the last few weeks of winter, keeps the inside of their flowers near a balmy 73°F (23°C), even when the air temperature is well below freezing.<sup>1</sup> It’s this unique heating strategy that makes the early flowering worth it; that warmth melts little circles into the lingering snow, exposing the flowers to their heat-loving pollinators.

This exposure introduces a second problem: herbivory. As soon as green plants become visible, hungry herbivores like mice, rabbits, and our over-abundant White-tailed Deer population begin feasting with a vengeance. That would pose a serious threat to such an early bloomer if it wasn’t so well protected: Skunk Cabbage is chalk full of tiny, needle-sharp calcium oxalate crystals. Though the plant is (allegedly) edible if possessed properly, when eaten raw the punctures and toxins from these little crystals cause burning pain and swelling to the mouth and throat. Not a good candidate for early spring snacking, after all!

With all these fun facts in mind, you are now well-armed to overshare about Skunk Cabbage to whomever your next companion is for a chilly, early spring stroll. These harbingers of spring may not be the most charismatic plant, but they’re certainly a surprising one – and a fantastic example of how perfectly each organism is adapted to its own unique habitat.

If you can’t sell your friends on Skunk Cabbages, alas – you can always talk to them about [salamander migration](#), instead!



A few amphibians from Kent’s first night of salamander migration on March 11. Migrations may continue on warm, wet nights for the next month, so please drive slowly! *Left to right:* Wood Frog (*Lithobates sylvaticus*), Four-Toed Salamander (*Hemidactylium scutatum*; a very small individual, acorn provided for scale), and Spotted Salamander (*Ambystoma maculatum*).

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<sup>1</sup> R.M. Knutson (1974), [Heat Production and Temperature Regulation in Eastern Skunk Cabbage](#), *Science* 186(4165): 746-747; H. Tanimoto et al. (2024), [Gene expression and metabolite levels converge in the thermogenic spadix of skunk cabbage](#), *Plant Physiology* 195(2): 1561-1585.