**Little Stinkers**

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Most people recognize the familiar large leaves of skunk cabbage in spring and summer, and some have had the misfortune of having their noses assaulted by the stench of damaged skunk cabbage tissue. These prolific plants provide knee-high ground cover along streams banks, flood plains, and other wet areas.

In late winter and into early spring, well before the plant's leaves cover the ground, skunk cabbage is literally all fired up to escape the cold grip of winter. What? A plant can have its own furnace?


photo from http://www.nwf.org/Wildlife/Wildlife-Library/Plants/Skunk-Cabbage.aspx

*And Spring arose on the garden fair,*
*Like the Spirit of Love felt everywhere;*
*And each flower and herb on Earth's dark breast*
*rose from the dreams of its wintry rest.*

*~Percy Bysshe Shelley, "The Sensitive Plant"*

Skunk cabbage is a rarity in the plant world in that it is thermogenic and actually creates its own heat through the breakdown of certain sugars and amino acids. The pollen-producing stigma of skunk cabbage is not frost-tolerant, so the plant maintains an internal temperature of 68-70$^{o}$ F for about two weeks, even when the air outside is freezing cold. The heat causes snow and ice surrounding the plant to melt away, leaving small, cleared areas with a stiff, hooded plant at the center. Inside the hood sits a flower without petals that smells of carrion. The season's first insects pollinate the plants, converting "death" into life. Once the pollen has been shed, the plant stops producing its own heat.

Skunk cabbage is a long-lived, perennial plant. Some estimates indicate that some individual plants might be up to a hundred years old. Few animals eat the plant. It is not toxic, but it is unpleasant to eat, due to its rank odor and the hot, peppery sensation its calcium oxalate raphide crystals deliver when eaten. In French Canada, the plant is called *tabac du diable* ("devil's tobacco") or *chou puant* ("stinking cabbage"). No matter what it is called, this plant is not a typical flower, but it is an easily recognized plant of the Lamprey rivers landscape.