



Mountain Loop Conservancy Fact Sheet:

Skunk Cabbage *Lysichiton americanum*



Identification: When you drive on the Mountain Loop in the spring, you'll see bright yellow "hoods" growing in the marshy edges of streams, ponds, drainage ditches and other damp areas. Almost shocking in a landscape still in the winter doldrums! These are the outer shields of the Skunk Cabbage flowers. They are also called Swamp Lanterns; it is easy to see why.

cabbage in bloom

Skunk

Range: These brilliant harbingers of spring grow along the Pacific Coast from Alaska to northern California in ephemeral wet spots, from the nearshore to the middle altitudes. On the Mountain Loop, you'll see the yellow hoods near Granite Falls in early March. Green leaves begin in early May. The yellow hoods won't emerge from the wetlands until late May at Big Four and higher areas along the Loop. The green leaves begin to grow in June.

Unique characteristics: Skunk Cabbage, *Lysichiton americanum*, looks like a jungle plant. In fact, most of its relatives are indeed tropical (for example, calla lily and philodendron). Our Pacific Northwest version has three growth phases: first comes the yellow hood, the *spathe*, which emerges from soggy soil. Then a corn-cob-like structure, the *spadix*, with small, pale green round buds, pokes up into the hood. These buds are the flowers. Weeks later, glossy green leaves begin; these can grow to 5 feet (1.5 m) long and 1+ foot (30 cm) wide and give us a magnificent show of green until the first cold rains of fall. Then they turn gold and just disappear.



Value to wildlife: The yellow hoods and flower stalks put out a strong odor at certain temperature and light conditions (hence the name) which attracts insects, especially the rove beetles who

feed and mate in the protection of the hood. Most likely the beetles carry pollen from one plant to another to fertilize the flowers. Other insects, as well as slugs, nibble on the leaves, as do some mammals, including deer and bear.

Historical uses: The early peoples of the Pacific Northwest had many uses for the huge leaves, especially as linings in baskets, for baking wrappers, for storage, wherever a good lining was needed. The leaf stalks and spadix were also food sources, but only after long steaming or baking. The roots were dried, roasted and ground into a powder to use as flour in baking. There were also several medicinal uses, among the uses was treating skin ailments. Early settlers made it into “Smokers Tea” to soothe sore throats. Skunk Cabbage is still used today in herbal medicines, but only after careful preparation.



Skunk cabbage habitat

Interesting Fact: This plant has a very high amount of calcium oxalate crystals. It must be handled very carefully and be prepared very carefully for use in food or herbal medicines. Just touching it can cause skin irritation for some people. Insects and animals are able to tolerate the crystals, but the toxins will burn human mouths and throats, and cause stomach and intestinal sickness. So it is best just to enjoy looking at this delightful spring and summer splash of color.

Sources

Schofield, J.J. (1989) *Discovering Wild Plants*. Alaska Northwest Books, Anchorage, Seattle

Kruckeberg, A. R. (1991). *The Natural History of Puget Sound Country*. UW Press, Seattle

Pojar, J. and A. MacKinnon (1994). *Plants of the Pacific Northwest coast*. Vancouver, BC, Canada: Lone Pine Publishing.

Prepared by Sonia Thompson for the Mountain Loop Conservancy June 2010 ©.

Photos by Bruce Barnbaum June 2010 ©

This fact sheet was made possible by a grant from The Mountaineers Foundation, Seattle, WA.