

## Sure sign of spring



Thrusting it way through ice and snow, skunk cabbage is our earliest spring wild flower. —B. Pegg.

Edge and Betty Pegg During the month of February, though the ground may be covered with snow and the cold blasts of winter be still upon us, a most extraordinary flower of the swamp land prepares to bloom.

This strange plant pushes its way upward through the ice-covered earth to be the first flower of spring and one of nature's miracles. A member of the arum family (araceae) and a

close relative of the "Jack in the Pulpit", our earliest flower is sometimes called Polecat weed or Parson in Pillory but most commonly Skunk Cabbage. The plant gets its name from the strong odour given off when any part of the flower or leaves is crushed.

Skunk cabbage first appears above the ground as a tight coil of green leaves, this is the spathe, which later forms a protective hood for the

flower inside. By mid March the spathe is very colourful taking on gold and brown designs, mottled with maroon. This is an excellent time to photograph it.

By the time summer rolls around the Skunk Cabbage will have grown into a giant leaved plant. The large leaves were once gathered by Indians and used for food in much the same way we use lettuce. The plant was also valued for its medicinal uses including

the making of ointments. Today Skunk Cabbage is becoming difficult to find. I have found some in the Uxbridge and Scugog areas, but the largest patch I have seen is in Morningside Park. Like orchids and many other wild flowers, the

Skunk Cabbage depends on the swamplands for its very life. Let's think twice before we destroy this habitat. Let's give future generations an opportunity to enjoy the beauty of this remarkable plant and to have its promise of spring!

In Africa, some native tribes practice the strange custom of beating the ground with clubs and babbling wild, blood-curdling yells. Anthropologists call this a form of primitive expression. In America, we call it golf.

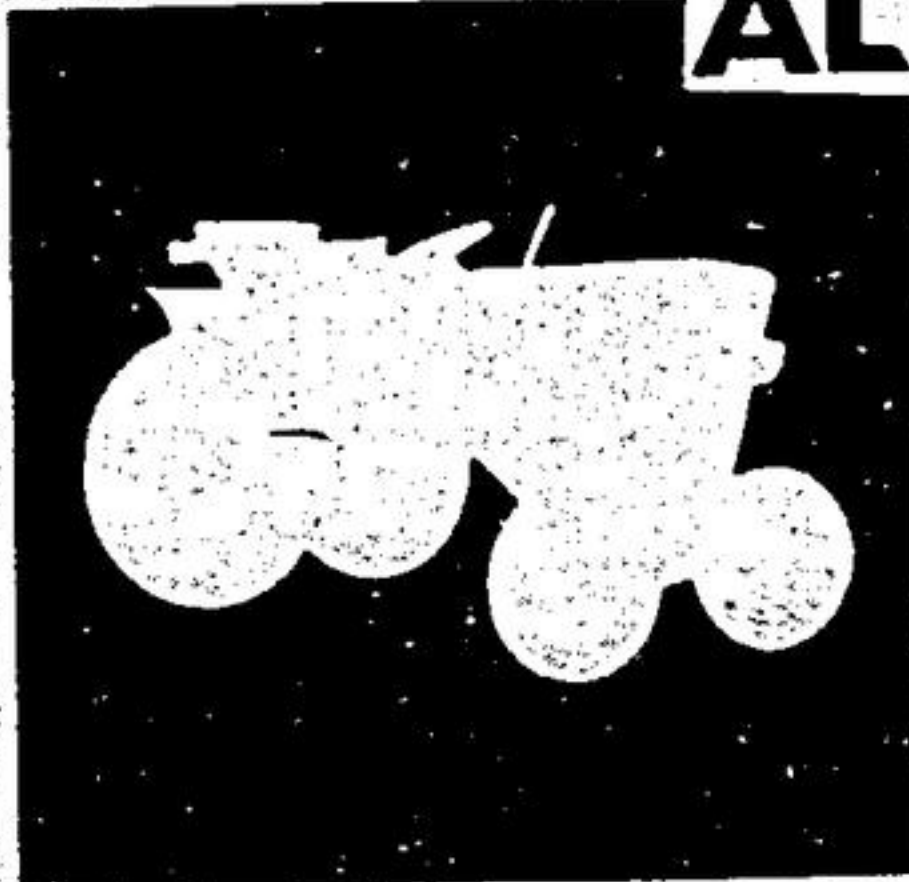
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