Produced by Peter Brown, Olaf Booy and Mark Hill

American Skunk-cabbage

Species Description

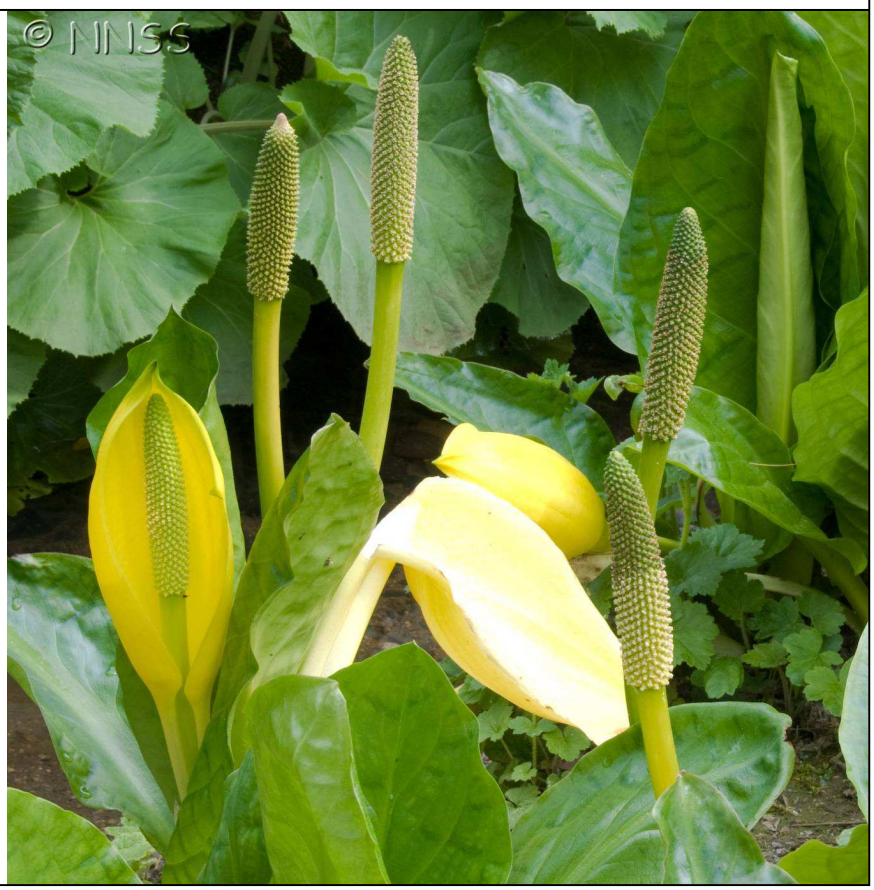
Scientific name: *Lysichiton americanus*
AKA: Western Skunk-cabbage
Native to: Western North America
Habitat: Wet woodland, streamsides, muddy pond margins

Yellow flowers are produced in spring (late March to May) that resemble those of wild arum (lords-and-ladies). They emit a strong odour like that of a skunk. The plant has a basal rosette of stemmed leathery leaves, usually up to about 70cm long. It is a tall herb growing up to 1.5m in height. Green berries are produced in the summer.

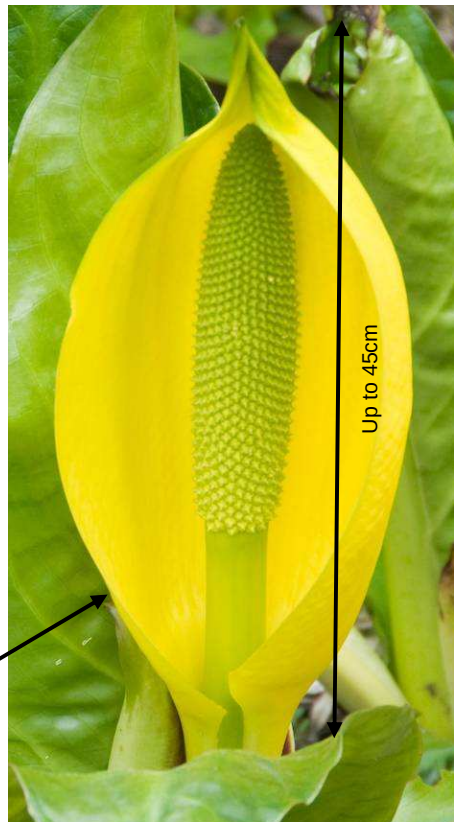
American skunk-cabbage needs a wet site but has no specific soil requirements - it can occur in soils from light sand to heavy clay that are acid, neutral or alkaline. It is a hardy perennial lowland plant, but can grow at altitudes of up to 1400m.

Seeds may be dispersed via waterways but also probably by birds and mammals, as occurs in the native range.

American skunk-cabbage is able to form dense stands and may negatively impact on some native plants, out-competing them by shadowing.



Key ID Features



1 or 2 (sometimes up to 4) bright yellow spathes (look like large petals)

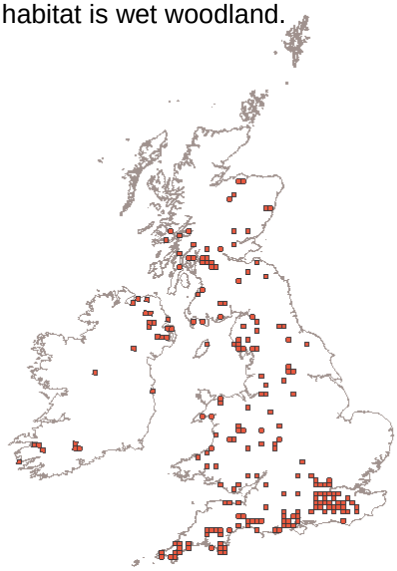
Leaves 40-70cm long (sometimes up to 1.5m)

Identification throughout the year

Most easily identified when in flower (late March to May). When not in flower large cabbage-like leaves, often on swamp mud, may be used for identification.

Distribution

Widespread but not generally common. Its normal habitat is wet woodland.



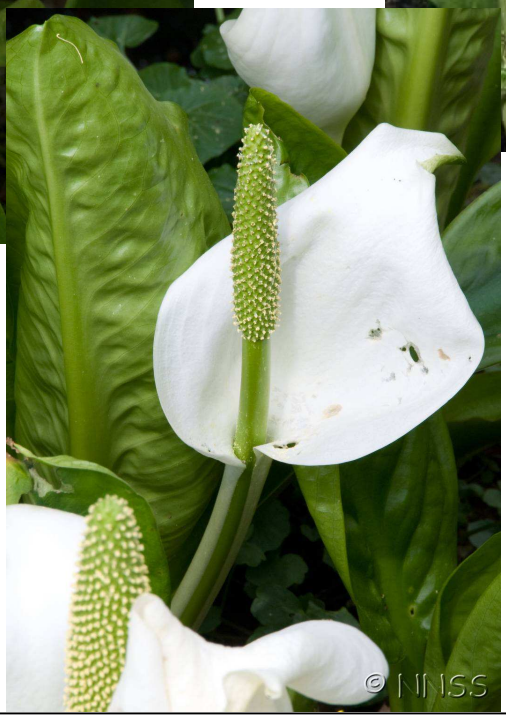
Source: NBN Gateway. Check website for current distribution

Similar Species

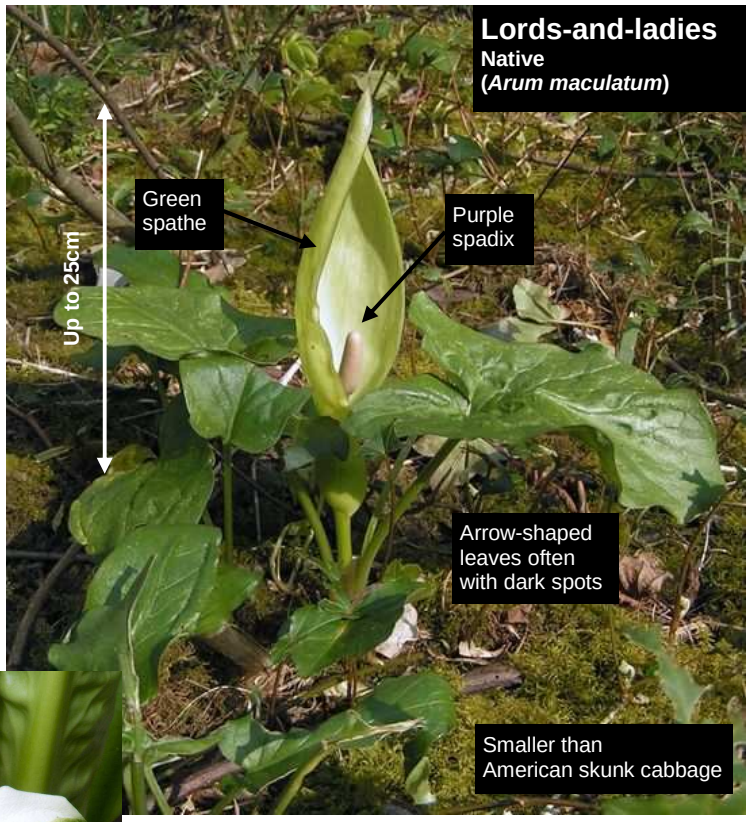
Asian Skunk-cabbage
Non-native
(*Lysichiton camtschatcensis*)

Very similar plant but slightly smaller. Occurs in similar habitats. Hybrids between American and Asian skunk-cabbages can occur.

Flowers more or less scentless



Lords-and-ladies
Native
(*Arum maculatum*)



References and further reading:

Blamey, M, Fitter, R and Fitter, A (2003) *"The Wild Flowers of Britain and Ireland. The Complete Guide to the British and Irish Flora"* A & C Black, London

Preston, C D, Pearman, D A and Dines, T A (editors) (2002) *"New Atlas of the British and Irish Flora".* Oxford University Press

Stace, C (1999) *"Field Flora of the British Isles".* Cambridge University Press

Photos from: Sannse, RPS and GBNNSS