

Devilish Voodoo Lilies



PHOTO BY BONNIE COURTER

When fully bloomed, the voodoo lily produces a rotten flesh odor to attract carrion flies and midges that are its natural pollinators. Once the flower has been pollinated, the fowl odor will disappear.

Question: While walking by a home recently, I noticed a very strong, nauseating smell and thought maybe it was coming from a dead animal. Much to my surprise, the source of this rancid smell was a huge purple flower! Can you identify it and give me any information about this strange plant?

Answer: The weird tropical plant you are describing is commonly known as a Voodoo Lily, *Amorphophallus konjac*. A member of the Philodendron family, the voodoo lily is native to tropical areas of eastern Asia, including Vietnam, Japan, China and Indonesia. Other common names given to this plant are Devil's Tongue, Dragon Plant, Elephant Yam, Leopard Arum and Snake Palm.

The plant grows from a starchy tuber, which is edible and processed into a tasteless



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flour or a stiff jelly. This jelly can be used as a vegan substitute for gelatin. The Japanese use konjac flour in the making of shirataki noodles, and the tuber starch is an ingredient for a popular Asian fruit jelly snack. Caution must be taken as the tuber contains calcium oxalate, making it toxic if consumed raw.

The voodoo lily is mostly grown as a curiosity and for its interesting foliage. It is a perennial in Zones 6-10, and frost-sensitive. Rising out of the tuber in the spring as the soil warms is a single tripartite

leaf on a tall, spotted pinkish-gray and olive-green stalk which can grow up to 6 feet tall.

The tuber itself can grow up to 50 pounds and a foot in diameter. The size of the leaf indicates the size of the tuber so the bigger the leaf, the bigger the tuber. The leaf only lasts throughout the growing season, then shrivels and dies back in late summer or fall.

Some of the largest flowers in the world come from this genus, and voodoo lily is no exception. This deep purplish bloom that arises from the stalk puts forth a sheathing bract or spathe up to 3 feet long. At the base of the spadix (a flower spike with a fleshy axis) are the female pistils and above them are the male stamens with a sterile area at the top of the spadix.

When fully in bloom, as you noticed, the flower produces

a rotten flesh odor to attract the carrion flies and midges that are its natural pollinators. If you should look down into the base of the spadix, you may see these flies congregating. Once the flower has been pollinated, the fowl odor will disappear.

If for some reason you wanted to propagate this plant, the tubers readily produce offsets and you can just separate the snake-like, stoloniferous tubers with rounded ends from the parent plant. Do this after the leaves have withered in the fall. After digging up the tubers, removing any loose soil, simply store them throughout the winter on a shelf.

In order to produce a bloom, the tuber should be the size of a softball or larger. Then around the end of January, a flower stalk will start to form. When the soil starts to warm in late spring, plant

the tuber outdoors and bury it deeply into a rich, organic soil – approximately as far below the surface as the tuber is wide.

Voodoo lily tolerates most conditions from full shade to full sun, but prefers dappled shade. A heavy feeder, fertilize heavily through the growing season, then stop watering and feeding in late summer.

So if you want to impress your friends and neighbors (or keep them away with a stinky plant) you can't go wrong with planting a voodoo lily.

Do you have a gardening or insect question? Contact the Douglas County Master Gardeners via email at douglasmg@oregonstate.edu. Douglas County Master Gardeners are trained volunteers who help the OSU Extension Service serve the people of Douglas County.