

AMORPHOPHALLUS

by Frederick B. Essig

Amorphowhat? Well, the name is best left untranslated in polite company, but many of you will figure it out on your own. In common terms, the names devil's tongue, snake palm, and voodoo lily have been applied to these truly bizarre members of the plant kingdom. These are Aroids, members of the family Araceae which also includes the more civilized *Anthuriums*, *Philodendrons*, and calla lilies.

Like all aroids, the *Amorphophalluses* have inflorescences that consist of a thick spike of minute flowers (the spadix), surrounded by a large leaf-like structure (the spathe). And in this genus, the word "large" is more than appropriate. "Bizarre" and "grotesque" come to mind for some of the species as well.

Take *Amorphophallus titanum*, for example, in which the flowering structure (really a inflorescence) can be 9 feet tall and 4 feet across. This object of desire for Aroid fanatics is becoming more common in cultivation, and in recent years has been blooming at Fairchild Tropical Garden in Miami and Selby Botanical Garden in Sarasota. It's not in garden shops yet, though. You still have to go through networks of clubbers, specialty dealers, or botanical gardens to get a live specimen. (For additional pictures of the outlandish bloom go to <http://www.ftg.org/blooms/moreamorph.html> or <http://florawww.eeb.uconn.edu/images/>



photo by Frederick B. Essig

A. paeonifolius does a great impression of a rotting animal carcass.

byspecies/amorphophallus_titanum01.jpg.)

Amorphophallus plants grow from large underground corms, and many are adapted to be dormant during the dry season in seasonal tropical woodlands. Some species adapt this cycle nicely to the Florida winter; others are prone to rot if we have a wet

winter. They need to be dug up and kept dry until spring. If you spend money for a rare species, it's better to do the latter.

When growth begins, a gigantic leaf stalk emerges from the bud of the corm, and spreads out a compound blade that resembles a tattered umbrella. The leaves of *A. titanum* can be 15 feet



photo by Frederick B. Essig

The lush, tropical foliage of *A. paeonifolius* helps to make up for its less-appealing qualities.



The dark beauty of the voodoo lily, *A. konjac*.

hood, not only for the spectacular bloom, but also for the foul odor emitted by the bloom. This is a fragrance designed to diffuse through miles of dank rain-forest in their native Sumatra to attract pollinating insects.

The definitive treatment of *Amorphophallus* has yet to be written, but it appears that there are around 170 species throughout the Old World tropics, many new ones described in just the last few years from remote



A. bulbifer requires warm, moist conditions.

tall and 15 feet wide - these are individual leaves we're talking about! If the corm has stored up enough energy, the flower stalk will come up first. Should you ever have one of these in your yard, you will become the center of attention for your entire neighbor-

corners of southeast Asia. Two species are fairly common in central Florida, and they are quite different from one another. *A. paeonifolius* (also listed in some sources as *A. campanulatus*) is a rugged plant that thrives and proliferates in central Florida

gardens. It has leaves that can be 3 to 4 feet tall, and a short, squat inflorescence that does a great impression of a rotting animal carcass. Both the broad, dinner plate-like spathe, and the bloated, wrinkled top of the spadix are a mottled brownish maroon in color. The whole thing stinks for a short time at sunrise or sunset, making it irresistible to carrion flies, which effect pollination. The lush foliage lasts from May through October, until we begin to have cold nights, so it can serve as an important component of tropical landscapes in the summer. The flowers appear in May and last for a week or so.

The other common species is *A. bulbifer*, which is much smaller and no competitor for the ugly prize owned by *A. paeonifolius*. The spathes are a pleasant pink on the inside and speckled green on the outside (though still somewhat smelly).



Also known as elephant yam, *A. paeonifolius* is sure to be an object of interest in any garden.



A. titanum “Mr. Stinky” bloomed last May at Fairchild Tropical Garden.

The leaves are up to 3 feet tall and more simply branched than in *A. paeonifolius*. They get their name

(“bulb-bearers”), because they produce small corms on the leaves that can be popped off at the end of the season and planted. It’s thus easy to make lots of these plants. *A. bulbifer* is a little more delicate than *A. paeonifolius*. A stretch of dry weather or a hint of cool air will send it in retreat back to its corm, not to be seen again until warm, moist conditions return the next spring. But with good soil and vigilant watering it will thrive and multiply.

One other species that shows up sometimes is the “Voodoo lily,” *Amorphophallus konjac* (known also by an older name, *Hydrosme rivieri*), which has a tall, dark

purplish-brown spathe and spadix. It can sometimes be found as a novelty item in mainstream mail-order catalogues.

Some of the many other species can be seen on the Internet. Begin with the International Aroid Society’s Web page, www.aroid.org/genera/amorphophallus/amorph.html, and follow links from there. Interesting links show up just by typing the word *Amorphophallus* into a search engine. With a little hunting, many of the species can be found for sale by specialty dealers or club exchanges. You might even find an *Amorphophallus titanum* for sale!

Dr. Essig wrote about carnivorous plants in the Dec/Jan 02 issue. He is an Associate Professor of Biology at USF in Tampa.