

# The Columbus Dispatch

Giant rare bloom about ready to stink up the place at OSU greenhouse

by Spencer Hunt. 4/16/2011

Spring is the time of year when the heady, sweet fragrances of budding flowers waft on the breeze. Not so much at Ohio State University. At the Biological Sciences Greenhouse on campus, *Amorphophallus titanum* is getting ready to bloom. And when it does, this rare 8-foot-tall, 4-foot-wide monster from the rain forest will reek like there is no tomorrow. "I'd say it's like several-days-old bloated roadkill," said Deborah Wiley, a greenhouse curator at Virginia Tech University in Blacksburg, Va., who has raised four of these blooms that are more commonly called "corpse flowers."

"It's awful. (The smell) reaches out into the parking lot. It can be overwhelming," Wiley said. Joan Leonard can hardly wait. She coordinates Ohio State's greenhouse and has been growing corpse flowers since 2001. This is the first of the five to bloom. "This is 10 years' worth of work. It takes a lot of patience and care," said Leonard, who has never smelled a titan arum, as they also are known. Leonard said she wasn't certain the plant would bloom until Wednesday, when its protective outer leaves split to reveal the fringes of the spathe, the flower's umbrella-size "petals."

Visitors will be able to smell the bloom, too, but they'll have to move fast. The flower withers after a day or two. That's why the university has installed a webcam and is posting daily progress updates on Woody (that's right, it has a famous football name) on the greenhouse's website. "We're looking at probably the first or second week of May," Leonard said. "Once we know it's going to open, we will post what the visitation hours will be." If other blooms are any indication, crowds will form. About 76,000 people lined up to see the titan arum that bloomed at Huntington Botanical Gardens in 1999 in the Los Angeles suburb of San Marino. So why does this plant stink like death? Scientists think it's a survival strategy. Although the aroma is revolting to humans, it's irresistible for carrion beetles and flesh flies, which help pollinate the flower.

The plant is on the verge of extinction. About 70 percent of its rain forest habitat in western Sumatra has been destroyed through illegal logging and farmland expansion, Leonard said. Researchers hope to keep the plants alive in greenhouses and pollinate them by hand. That way, a stockpile of titan arums will exist, preserved for a time when they can be returned to Sumatra. At Ohio State, Woody shot up 4.25 inches overnight Thursday and could be as tall as 48 inches today. Leonard said she expects the flower to top out at 6 to 8 feet in height. No one knows whether crowds will flock to see the plant, but unusual flowers do draw the curious, said Sean Barnes, a Franklin Park Conservatory horticulturalist. "I think it shocks people," said

Barnes, who added that he plans to sniff the titan. "There is a shock that something could be a flower and smell so awful."



# Corpse flower

*Amorphophallus titanum*

- **Native habitat:** Equatorial rain forests of central Sumatra in Indonesia
- **First discovered:** Italian botanist Odoardo Beccari discovered the plant in Sumatra in 1878.
- **First U.S. bloom:** New York Botanical Gardens, 1937
- **Biology:** For most of its life, the plant grows a single, umbrella-like leaf that resembles a tree. This leaf can grow 20 feet tall in the wild. Its trunk grows as thick as a person's thigh.
- **Description:** The blooming stalk can grow 10 feet tall and open to a diameter of 3 to 4 feet. Thousands of flowers are hidden at the base of the central column. The large, frilly-edged, leafy "skirt," called the spathe, resembles an upturned, fluted bell with a maroon interior.
- **Longevity:** The flower stays open for a few days. Once pollinated, the surrounding spathe falls off to expose cherry-size fruit that contain seeds.
- **Odor:** Once it blooms, the flower reeks. It is strongest at night, to attract carrion beetles and flesh flies that pollinate the plant.