

Skunk Cabbage

Species (Family)

Symplocarpus foetidus (L.) Salisb. (Araceae)

Synonym(s)

Dracontium foetidum L., Skunkweed

Part(s) Used

Rhizome, root

Pharmacopoeial and Other Monographs

BHP 1983^(G7)

PDR for Herbal Medicines 2nd edition^(G36)

Legal Category (Licensed Products)

GSL^(G37)

Constituents^(G22,G64)

Reported constituents include starch, gum-sugar, fixed and volatile oils, resin, tannin, an acrid principle and iron.

Other plant parts Large amounts of alkaloids (unspecified), phenolic compounds and glycosides have been isolated from all plant parts of skunk cabbage.⁽¹⁾ The leaves are reported to contain hydroxytryptamine;^(G22) three anthocyanin pigments have been isolated from the flowers, namely cyanidin-3-monoglucoside, cyanidin-3-rutinoside and peonidin-3-rutinoside.⁽²⁾

Food Use

Skunk cabbage is not used in foods.

Herbal Use

Skunk cabbage is stated to possess expectorant, anti-spasmodic and mild sedative properties. Traditionally, it has been used for bronchitis, whooping cough, asthma and specifically for bronchitic asthma.^(G7,G64)

Dosage

Powdered rhizome/root 0.5–1.0 g in honey or by infusion or decoction three times daily.^(G7)

Liquid extract 0.5–1.0 mL (1:1 in 25% alcohol) three times daily.^(G7)

Tincture 2–4 mL (1:10 in 45% alcohol) three times daily.^(G7)

Pharmacological Actions

In vitro and animal studies

None documented for the rhizome/root. The leaf extract has haemolytic properties.^(G22)

Clinical studies

None documented.

Side-effects, Toxicity

The root is reported to be bitter and acrid, with a disagreeable odour. Severe itching and inflammation of the skin has been documented.^(G51) No published toxicity studies were located.

Contra-indications, Warnings

It has been stated that the fresh plant can cause blistering.^(G42) In view of the acrid principle thought to be present in both the dried and fresh root,^(G51) skunk cabbage should be used with caution.

Pregnancy and lactation Skunk cabbage is reputed to affect the menstrual cycle.^(G22) In view of the lack of phytochemical, pharmacological, and toxicological information, and the irritant properties, the use of skunk cabbage during pregnancy and lactation should be avoided.

Pharmaceutical Comment

Little is known about the constituents, pharmacological activities or safety of skunk cabbage (even though citations as early as 1817 reported its irritant properties).^(G51) No documented evidence was found to justify the herbal uses. In view of the documented irritant properties, excessive use is not recommended.

References

See also General References G7, G22, G31, G36, G37, G42, G51 and G64.

1 Konyukhov VP *et al.* Dynamics of the accumulation of biologically active agents in *Lysichitum*

camtsochatcense and *Symplocarpus foetidus*. *Uch Zap Khabarovsk Gos Pedagog Inst* 1970; 26: 59–62.

2 Chang N *et al.* Anthocyanins in *Symplocarpus foetidus* (L.) Nutt. (Araceae). *Bot J Linn Soc* 1970; 63: 95–96.