Looking for Signs of Spring—ERG

BY Terry Bonace, Environmental Restoration Group

Though spring officially begins on March 20, our weather seldom gives indications of that season until late April or May. But look closely and you can find some hopeful signs.

Skunk Cabbage

Skunk Cabbage (*Symplocarpus foetidus*) is the first native flower to emerge here, sometimes blooming in January or February. Helping to accomplish this feat, skunk cabbage has the ability to raise its temperature. This heating, known as "thermogenesis," allows skunk cabbage to melt the surrounding snow. The flower itself and the sheath that shelters it is another strange feature of this plant. The sheath is known as the spathe and is mottled green or purple-brown. The small, yellowish blossoms that appear on a stem-like structure called the spadix are sheltered within the spathe. These flowers emit a carrion-like odor to attract fly pollinators. Skunk cabbage likes shady and wet areas. You will see it throughout the great marsh and small wetlands. Large, hosta-like leaves appear later in the spring.

Harbinger of Spring

Harbinger of Spring (*Erigenia bulbosa*) is our earliest blooming woodland wildflower with blooms recorded as early as March 17. This tiny, low-growing native plant is easy to overlook. The very small flowers grow in umbrella like clusters, each tiny flower with five petals. The flowers give the plant its alternate name, "pepper and salt," because the anthers of the flowers eventually turn black and contrast with the bright white petals. The root is a little bulb or tuber, hence the scientific name "bulbosa." An edible plant reference says that the bulb can be good for a "trailside nibble," but please don't taste it and thereby sacrifice this uncommon plant.

Speckled Alder Catkins

A small tree, Speckled Alder (*Alnus rugosa*), can be found growing in Beverly Shores wetlands. The name comes from the white, horizontal pores or "lenticels" that appear on the bark and stems. This tree is notable for its early March blooming period. Though not everyone will find the flowers to be beautiful, they are nonetheless a very welcome sight when searching for spring. The male flowers appear in dangling, reddish-yellow catkins before the leaves appear. The catkins are about 2 to 4 inches long. The female flowers appear simultaneously but are smaller and much less distinctive.

The Environmental Restoration Group (ERG) will be glad to help identify plants for you. Don't hesitate to contact Terry Bonace (tbonace@gmail.com) or Candice Smith (candicepetersonsmith@gmail.com) for assistance. Also please visit our website at www.bserg.org for further information on native and non-native plants.