



Spring's Harbinger

➤ IT WILL be several weeks yet before the spring poets unlimber their lyres and begin to sing the praises of crocuses and hepaticas and shy, modest violets. But the hardest harbinger of spring, the skunk cabbage, is at this moment probing its way up through the frozen soil, and even cracking thin ice on swamps, all over the East and throughout most of the Mississippi valley.

This sturdy flower defies a frosty and unfriendly world wherever the flat floor of a swamp or bog gives space enough for its rather expansive temperament. Right along with the alders, earlier than the pussy-willows, offering competition to that strange winter flowering shrub the witch-hazel, the skunk cabbage comes into bloom.

You can find skunk cabbages determinedly pushing plates of ice away, and unfolding their grotesque flower-sheaths through the holes they have made for themselves, with the thin sheets of frozen water leaning edgewise against them. If a thaw lets these plants get started, a subsequent freeze is of no avail; they keep right on coming in spite of it. It would take a genuine cold wave, driving the frost deep into the ground again, to stop them.

This great precociousness on the part of the skunk cabbage is made possible by its food hoard from the preceding summer.

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Like most vernal-flowering plants, it has a thick and fleshy rootstock, stored with starch, which supplies the energy and material needed for the growth it makes during a season when the sun gives scanty encouragement and the frozen earth even less.

This precociousness also makes it possible for the skunk cabbage to produce blossoms and have the important business of making seed well under way before other plants have even started.

There is no real need for the spring poets to turn up their noses so superciliously at the skunk cabbage. It offends nobody's nostrils unless it is trodden on or otherwise abused—and who would not fight back then? In this it is like its malodorous namesake; for the skunk also does not offend unless he is offended against.

The rough, gargoyle-like flowers of the skunk cabbage appear early, and the leaves, which will stand broad and flat and green all summer long, come on considerably later, when the last of the blossoms is about ready to curl up and die.

Later still, when the autumn frosts have abolished the leaves, you will find the fruits, round, spike-bristling clusters, suggestive of a medieval warrior's mace.

Science News Letter, February 19, 1955

AGRICULTURE

Develop Fast Growing Egg-Laying Broiler

➤ A CHICKEN, which grows from a chick to a three-pounder in 10 weeks, has been developed by poultrymen at the U. S. Department of Agriculture's Beltsville, Md., research center.

Named the Beltsville broiler, its developers think that it may become as famous as its cousin, the Beltsville Small White turkey.

The result of seven years of experimental breeding, the broiler is a Silver Cornish-New Hampshire cross. Geneticists responsible for the new bird carefully point out, however, that the Beltsville broiler is not a breed.

"It must be produced," the scientists explain, "by mating the new Silver Cornish, also developed at Beltsville, and New Hampshire stock. The best characteristics of these parents are reproduced only in the first generation."

The researchers developed the broiler while searching for a bird that was light in color, which they state is an easier bird to dress, one that feathered out quickly and grew rapidly. They also wanted a bird that would produce a maximum amount of meat in a 10-week period and more eggs annually than most meat-type breeds normally lay.

The scientists also reported in *Agricultural Research* (Feb.) that further work is needed with the breeding, but that the demand for the new broiler is already far greater than the supply. When available, limited numbers of eggs are sold to breeders and distributed to cooperating state experiment stations.

Science News Letter, February 19, 1955

AERONAUTICS

11,400 Miles an Hour Reached in Wind Tunnel

➤ THE AERODYNAMIC obstacles facing a plane that could fly around the world at low altitudes in a little more than two hours are being studied in a wind tunnel. The 11,400-mile-an-hour speed is believed to be the highest steady simulated wind velocity ever reached in a laboratory.

Scientists at the James Forrestal Research Center of Princeton University, Princeton, N. J., have maintained this gas flow continuously for as long as ten minutes.

The first series of tests with the machine were designed to study the effect of gas friction on simple geometric shapes, including plates, wedges and cones.

In a new approach to the problem of attaining high wind speeds, helium, a light, nonflammable gas, is blown through a test section about four inches in diameter. Thirty-five thousand cubic feet of the gas are kept compressed at 2,500 pounds per square inch to achieve the high velocities.

A vacuum ejector system draws the gas through the tunnel and discharges it into the atmosphere through a silencer.

In later experiments, Prof. Daniel C. Sayre, director of the center, and Drs. Seymour Bogdonoff and Andrew Hammitt expect to raise the simulated speeds to the machine's limit of 20 times the speed of sound, or about 15,000 miles an hour.

Science News Letter, February 19, 1955

DO PEOPLE "EXPLODE" IN YOUR OFFICE?

ARE you, as a business executive, a skilled 'human chemist'—good at handling your fellow-workers and in getting them to work well with each other? Or do people "explode" in your office—or in their contacts with some of their associates?

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