

Botanic Garden prepares for blooming corpse flower

Corpse flower to provide 'once-in-a-lifetime' viewing experience

FOUAD EGBARIA, Editor

Sometimes, love stinks — just ask Spike about it.

Who's Spike, you ask? Spike is the Chicago Botanic Garden's 12-year-old titan arum (*Amorphophallus titanum*) — commonly referred to as the corpse flower. For the first time in the Chicago area, the plant will bloom, providing a sensory experience, optical and olfactory, to visitors of the garden's Semitropical Greenhouse. (The first documented titan arum blooming in the United States occurred in 1937 at the New York Botanical Garden.)

Naming of titan arum plants is somewhat of a tradition at botanic gardens throughout the country, according to Tim Pollak, outdoor floriculturist at the Chicago Botanic Garden. In fact, the other titans in the garden's stock, he said, will also get names, well before they get to this point in their development.

The excitement surrounding the plant lies in the unknown. No one knows precisely when it will bloom, but as of Aug. 12, it was expected to do so within 6-10 days. Pollak said six might be a long shot, but expected warmer temperatures might actually speed up the process, too.

The garden's staff will have some clues that will indicate when it's ready to bloom. Leaves on the plant's exterior called bracts will fall down to the soil as it dries. From that point, Pollak said, they know they usually have two days before the plant is fully open

and blooming.

"But, we'll have to wait and see how it reacts with our conditions here," he added.

And when it does, you'll smell it. The odor will be at its strongest several hours before the plant is in full bloom, in the early afternoon into the evening, and will linger several hours into the next day.

With that, though, the sense of smell won't be the only one visitors will want to use.

"As we get closer, the fragrance — or the odor, if you will — is probably going to be one of the big things [people notice]," Pollak said. "Besides the odor, the flower itself is very beautiful, it's huge, it's something that most people haven't seen. It's going to be a once-in-a-lifetime sighting for most visitors, most staff even, for that matter.

"[Then] you take the context of what's gotten it to this point: how old it is, the requirements to get it to bloom ... it's a wonder."

The corpse flower, native to the Indonesian island of Sumatra, has started to become endangered, partially as a result of the palm oil industry, which has led to the destruction of the flower's habitats.

So, it's no small thing — literally and figuratively — to see such a flower bloom. In the wild, the titan arum typically reaches approximately 6-8 feet in height. Spike currently stands at approximately 3-feet tall, and will likely grow to between 5-6 feet in height, Pollak said, a typical height for a "containerized" botanic garden corpse flower.

Spike has been on display since Aug. 6 — but how did garden staff know what they had was a flower-in-bloom,

worthy of display, and not just a leaf? Pollak and his colleagues felt confident that they had a flower, a fact given away namely by the way in which it was growing: slightly off center. On top of that, a bulge at the base of the plant and the size of the corm, where energy is stored to shoot up the plant, indicated it was the real deal.

Pollak himself hasn't seen this particular species in bloom before, although he has seen others within the same genus, *Amorphophallus*, smaller in stature but with a similar "fragrance."

"This I would relate to a dead animal, rancid meat, death," Pollak said of the odor. "We've all had that smell of maybe an animal in your backyard that shouldn't be there or a mouse in your wall or underneath your sink, or walking on your sidewalk and there [is road-kill] that should have been picked up three weeks earlier ... that kind of smell."

Once it's in full bloom, which will last approximately 36-48 hours, the plant's spathe will start to collapse, in addition to the spadix, where the seeds are formed. At the base of the towering titan grow hundreds of male and female flowers. When pollination is successful, a seed stem shoots up that holds red-orange seeds about half the size of a golf ball, Pollak said.

The plant doesn't self-pollinate — and that's where the eau de corpse flower comes in.

In order to attract pollinators — insects, like the carrion beetle — the plant emits that famous fragrance. Once that's accomplished, the insect visitors hop from flower to flower, doing their work of pollination.

As they say, beauty is in

the eye of the beholder — or the smeller, in this case.

For Spike, however, they're looking to acquire donor pollen, potentially from the Denver Botanic Garden, which has its own titan arum on the verge of blooming. As of Wednesday, Aug. 12, the Denver Botanic Garden's corpse flower stood at 58.25-inches tall — on Monday, Aug. 17, Spike was 58.75 inches tall.

While this is the Chicago area's first corpse flower blooming, similar events around the country have drawn big crowds. In the lead-up to the big day, kids, especially, have flocked to the flower with interest, which Pollak said hopefully gets them interested in science.

"Wherever they've been on display, they've drawn a



The Chicago Botanic Garden's titan arum, dubbed "Spike," was expected to bloom within 6-10 days as of Aug. 12, making it the first corpse flower to bloom in the Chicago area. FOUAD EGBARIA/22ND CENTURY MEDIA

lot of attention," Pollak said. "Thousands of people have lined up to see them, wherever it's been."

On the night the flower blooms, the Botanic Garden's Semitropical Greenhouse will remain open until 2 a.m. and parking fees will be waived for visitors coming to see the flower.

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