

WILD ARUM LILY by Dave and Gill Shearing

As we emerge from Winter, we look forward to seeing the first blooms of Spring such as Primroses, Lesser Celandines, Wood Anemones and particularly our native Bluebells. However, there is a plant, which is common in gardens, ditches and woodland and is one of the first plants to show it's leaves in the Spring, and this is the Wild Arum.

The leaves are usually arrow shaped and plain dark green and glossy but can also be covered in black blotches. Later a strange hooded structure develops with a poker shaped, purple coloured spadix within. At the base of this spadix can be found a ring of Female flowers with a ring of Male flowers above.



Above the Male flowers is a ring of hairs forming an insect trap. Insects, especially certain midges, are attracted to the spadix by its (to our noses anyway) awful smell of Cow pats and a temperature up to 15 degrees Centigrade warmer than the ambient temperature.

The midges are trapped beneath the ring of hairs and are dusted with pollen by the Male hairs before being released by the plant. These pollen laden insects fly off and visit other Wild Arum flowers, thus pollinating them. After this pollination, bright red berries develop on a stalk from the Female flowers.

All parts of the plant can produce allergic reactions in many people and the plant should be handled with care. Although most of the plant is poisonous to animals (including humans) the berries are readily eaten by birds such as Blackbirds and Pheasants. These aid the spread of the plant as the seeds survive in the bird's droppings.

The toxicity is due to the presence of oxalates, which have needle shaped crystals that irritate the skin, mouth, tongue and throat. It is one of the most common causes of accidental plant poisoning based on attendance at Hospital emergency departments.

