

Fall for These Spooky Plants

By Sharon Vaughan Smith, Master Gardener

Corpse Flower (*Amorphophallus titanum*), Bat Flower (*Tacca chantrieri*) and Ghost Plant (*Graptopetalum paraguayense*) are all names of plants that sound a bit creepy. Since Halloween is around the corner, it is the perfect time to learn about these spooky-sounding, amazing plants, such as where they come from, how they got their names and how they are different from each other.

First is the Corpse Flower. It got its name from its smell. When the flower blooms, it smells like rotting onions, cabbage, fish and old stinky socks combined or even rotting flesh. While we may not find this smell desirable, the pollinators, beetles and flies do. In 1878, an Italian scientist, Odoardo Beccari, discovered the Corpse Flower growing in the rainforests of western Indonesia on the island of Sumatra. This large plant was recorded to be 5 feet in circumference and 10 feet tall. A single seedling or baby plant, grown from seeds of this plant, was sent to Kew Botanic Gardens in England where it bloomed 11 years later in 1889.

It takes years, even decades, before a corpse flower blooms. Its flower is a giant flowering structure with a thick central spike (called the spadix) that is surrounded by two rings of male and female flowers. The large frilly leaf (called a spathe) wraps around the two rings of flowers like a cape for protection. Though the entire plant grows slowly before it blooms, the plant's bud grows several inches per day. When the two protective leaves around the bud fall off, over 24 to 36 hours (a day and a half), the large frilly leaf opens. Since the bloom time is very short, people become excited to see this rare flower no matter how stinky it smells.



Corpse Flower

photo: Montgomery College

Our next spooky plant is called the Bat Flower. It is native to Southeast Asia in countries such as Laos and Vietnam. It is a plant from the yam family, and its tuberous roots are long and look like yams. What makes this plant special is its beautiful green leaves and black to dark purple 12-inch wide flowers. The flowers look like flying bats and unlike the Corpse Flower, the Bat Flower blooms last five to seven weeks.



photo: L. Brothers © Smithsonian Institution, 2000-2011

While the corpse flower is too big and too stinky when in bloom to grow in your home, the bat flower, while a challenge to grow in your home, is not impossible with the right care, temperature and light. It grows well in 70 to 80 percent shade by putting the plant in an east- or south-facing window where it will receive four hours of indirect sunlight. By keeping its soil moist, yet not wet, and replanting it in a bigger pot every year, the bat flower will stay happy.

The last plant on our list named the Ghost Plant differs from the Bat Flower because it likes to grow in full sun and in dry soil conditions. Native to Mexico, it grows close to the ground in clumps that are 14 to 20 inches wide and can reach 6 to 12 inches tall. The plant got its name from the powdery coating called pruinose, which gives it a white, ghostly color.

The Ghost Plant is a succulent. Its thick leaves hold water, which allows the plant to grow in desert conditions. The leaves are pointy and grow in a rose shape along stems. This plant would also be a wonderful addition in your home, since it is hardy and easy to grow.

Now that you have learned about these interesting plants and found out that they are not really spooky and only their names are, you might find it interesting to visit a local garden center where you can ask someone if they may have a Bat Flower or a Ghost Plant for you to see. You may even want to buy one or both of these plants to grow at your home. As for the Corpse Plant, head to the United States Botanic Garden and see this amazing plant the next time it blooms.



photo: Jenny Gordon, Duke University

Ghost Plant

References

- Three Corpse Flowers Bloomed at USBG in 2017*, United States Botanic Garden
- The Black Bat Flower*, Pha Tad Ke Botanical Garden
- Black Bat Flower Inspiration* by Jonah Holland, Lewis Ginter Botanical Garden
- Ghost Plant*, Gardening Solutions, University of Florida