

## FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE



Smithsonian  
National Museum of Natural History



UNITED STATES  
BOTANIC GARDEN

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## THE RETURN OF THE TITAN SMITHSONIAN PLANT TO BLOOM AT THE U.S. BOTANIC GARDEN

**November 15, 2005 - Washington, DC** - A rare, stinky event is about to happen -- again! A gigantic plant, *Amorphophallus titanum* (commonly known as “titan arum”), is about to bloom! The plant is owned by the Smithsonian National Museum of Natural History, Department of Botany, and is currently on display in the U.S. Botanic Garden (USBG) Conservatory. As “Botanical Partners on the Mall,” the Smithsonian and the USBG agreed that the Conservatory provides the optimal environment (very warm, bright, and humid) for the plant to bloom, so it was brought from the Smithsonian Department of Botany Research Greenhouses in Suitland, MD on the morning of Tuesday, November 8. Horticulturists from the two institutions estimate that the titan arum **probably will bloom by Thanksgiving Day**, November 24. Raised from seed, this will be the **first time ever that this plant has bloomed**. Once fully open, it may remain in bloom for 24 to 48 hours, and then it will collapse quickly. After that occurs, pollen will be collected and preserved by scientists from the Department of Botany.

The renown of the titan arum comes from its great size -- it is reputed to have the largest known unbranched inflorescence. The plant is native only to the tropical rainforests of Sumatra, Indonesia. Since the first recorded bloom in the United States in 1937, titan arums have been exhibited in this country on just a few occasions. Many will recall that a titan arum owned by the USBG bloomed, for its second time, while on display at the Conservatory in July 2003, generating an enormous response of about 10,000 visitors on the peak day. As small seedlings, the USBG plant and the Smithsonian titan arum were given to the two institutions in October 1993 by Maryland arum enthusiasts Craig and Fanny Phillips. The Phillipses had grown the plants from seed collected in 1991 by California physician James R. Symon, now deceased, who had searched for the titan arum during several journeys to Sumatra. (Symon later traveled in Sumatra with Sir David Attenborough in 1993, to find the plant for the filming of the BBC production “The Private Life of Plants.”)

The titan arum emerges from, and stores energy in, a huge underground stem called a “corm.” The plant blooms on an unpredictable schedule, when sufficient energy is accumulated, usually after several years. The developing inflorescence initially appears as a pale green, bud-shaped structure composed of a “spathe” enclosing a central spike-like “spadix.” At first hidden inside the spathe, the spadix is revealed as the entire structure swells. At full bloom, the spathe is fully unfurled to reveal a crimson interior. The ultimate height of the spadix depends on the energy accumulated in the corm, and the speed of the development depends on day and night temperatures. The average recorded height of an inflorescence is about 5 feet, and the largest one in cultivation was 9 feet, 2 inches. In their natural habitat, titan arums can grow up to 12 feet tall! The **current height** of the Smithsonian’s titan arum **is 48 inches** (i.e., 4 feet); **its corm weighs over 100 lbs.**, so the ultimate height could well exceed the average. At full bloom the inflorescence is well-known for smelling like rotting meat, hence its other common name, “corpse flower.” The odor is released in pulses and attracts carrion beetles and other pollinators in the plant’s native Sumatra.

The U.S. Botanic Garden Conservatory is open to the public, free of charge, every day from 10:00 a.m. to 5:00 p.m.; it is located at 100 Maryland Avenue, SW, at the foot of the U.S. Capitol. Visitors are encouraged to take Metrobus and Metrorail. Further information on the titan arum display and “bloom watch” is available by contacting the USBG ([www.usbg.gov](http://www.usbg.gov); 202-225-8333) or the National Museum of Natural History ([www.mnh.si.edu/botany](http://www.mnh.si.edu/botany); 202-633-2950 for the media, 202-633-1000 for the public).