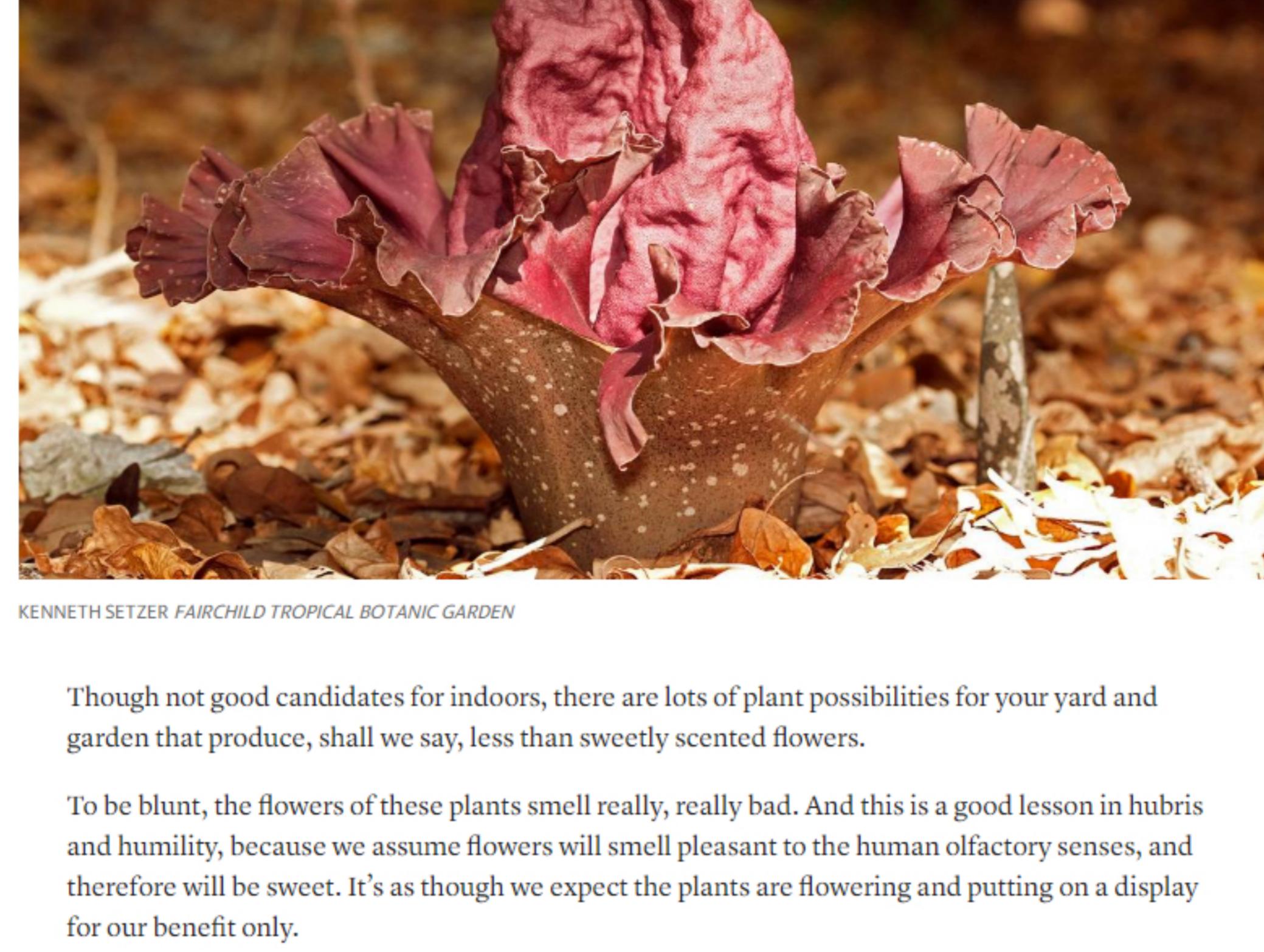


These flowers are achingly beautiful oddities. And they stink. You should grow them.

BY KENNETH SETZER FAIRCHILD TROPICAL BOTANIC GARDEN

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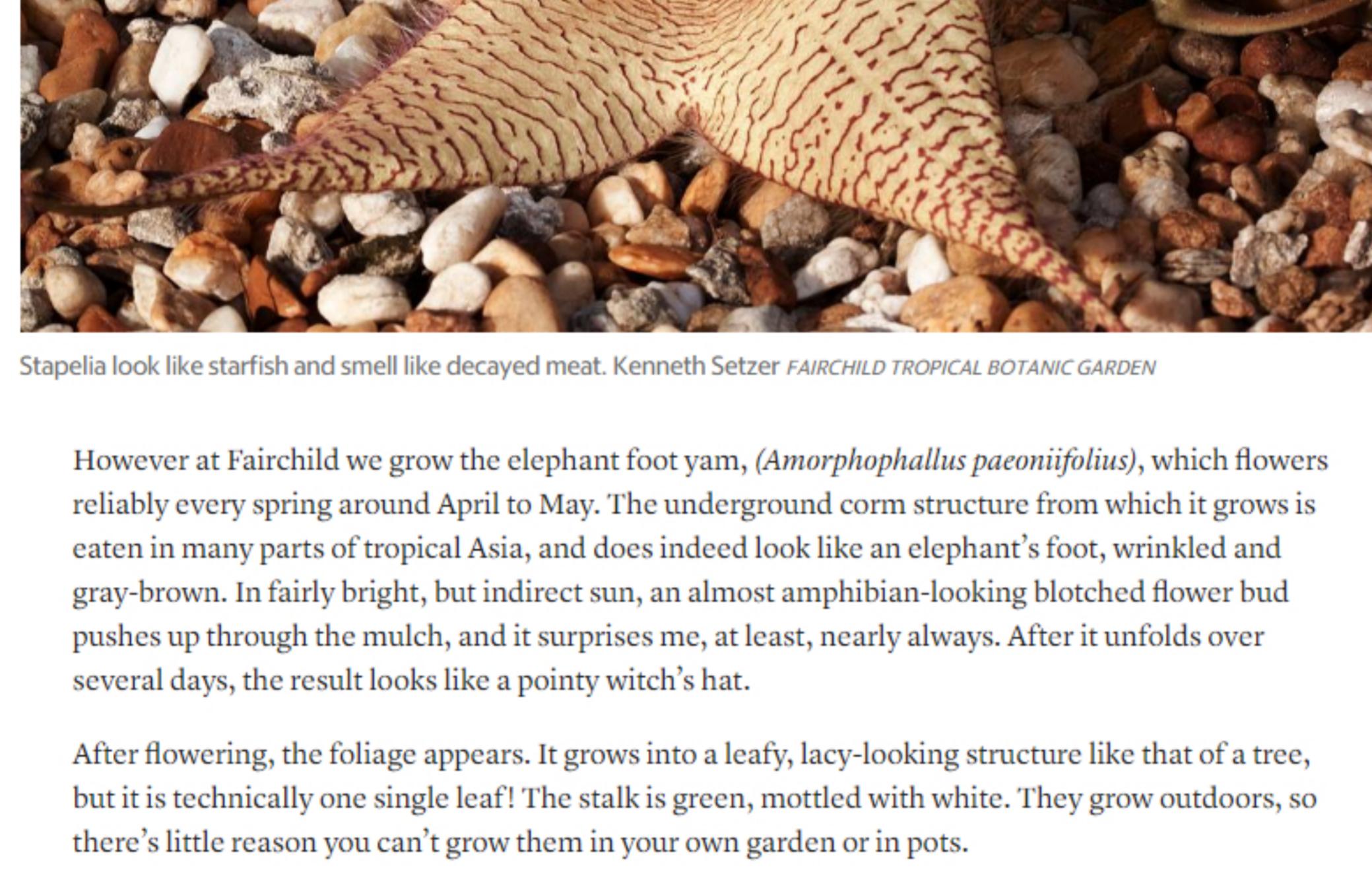
Though not good candidates for indoors, there are lots of plant possibilities for your yard and garden that produce, shall we say, less than sweetly scented flowers.

To be blunt, the flowers of these plants smell really, really bad. And this is a good lesson in hubris and humility, because we assume flowers will smell pleasant to the human olfactory senses, and therefore will be sweet. It's as though we expect the plants are flowering and putting on a display for our benefit only.

If you like the scent of rotting meat, then go on thinking this. However, plants produce unpleasant odors to draw other creatures that actually are attracted to the scent of decay: pollinators such as flies and certain beetles.

One famous putrid plant is the *Amorphophallus titanum* plant, often called corpse flowers or more delicately "Mr. Stinky." In the aroid family, this genus actually contains many species, and many that are not difficult to grow at home. Grow them outside — or at least move them there when they flower.

Those huge *Amorphophallus titanum* require lots of energy to produce their huge inflorescence, so it's far from a yearly occurrence, and is one reason people line up to see it when it does flower.



Stapelia look like starfish and smell like decayed meat. Kenneth Setzer FAIRCHILD TROPICAL BOTANIC GARDEN

However at Fairchild we grow the elephant foot yam, (*Amorphophallus paeoniifolius*), which flowers reliably every spring around April to May. The underground corm structure from which it grows is eaten in many parts of tropical Asia, and does indeed look like an elephant's foot, wrinkled and gray-brown. In fairly bright, but indirect sun, an almost amphibian-looking blotched flower bud pushes up through the mulch, and it surprises me, at least, nearly always. After it unfolds over several days, the result looks like a pointy witch's hat.

After flowering, the foliage appears. It grows into a leafy, lacy-looking structure like that of a tree, but it is technically one single leaf! The stalk is green, mottled with white. They grow outdoors, so there's little reason you can't grow them in your own garden or in pots.

But back to the flowers: I can't forget the time I got an inch away from one to smell it for myself. Wow. It was like rotting fish, and flies were loving it. The flies also attracted hungry anoles, so one inflorescence was creating a mini, temporary rood enchain.

If you get lucky, the elephant foot yam will produce fruit. For lack of better writing skills, I'll say the fruiting structure looks like someone glued multi-hued candy onto a staff. Very odd.

Though *Amorphophallus* are aroids it seems the strategy of attracting flies and carrion beetles as pollinators has evolved in many other families, like dogbane, orchid, mallow and soursop families and others.



Bulbophyllum orchid — its enticing flowers hide an evil smell. Kenneth Setzer FAIRCHILD TROPICAL BOTANIC GARDEN

Bulbo *p* *hyllum fletcheriana*

is an orchid with huge, hanging leaves that look like giant green tongues. When flowering, it's placed out in the Garden for all to see and smell. Its inflorescence is a gorgeous, white and purple structure that resembles octopus tentacles. When I saw/smelled it at Fairchild, I made a note of my experience: "The gorgeous maroon flower reeks of rotting rat."

Some *Aristolochia* vines, aka the Dutchman's pipe vine, can also produce fairly malodorous flowers. Many, like the *Aristolochia grandiflora*, are important swallowtail butterfly host plants. Parts of the flowers are fused to form the pipe shape that temporarily traps insect pollinators to ensure they deposit pollen from other flowers and are covered with fresh pollen before release. (Fairchild hosts quite a few *Aristolochia* plants; check out the very weird *A. salvadorensis* in the Tropical Plant Conservatory.)

Then there are *Stapelia* and *Huernia*. Here's a bit of irony: while their flowers are also stinkers, they are closely related to *Plumeria*, aka frangipani. Its intoxicating scent can whisk you away mentally to a tropical paradise, while *Stapelia* and *Huernia* flowers smell like last night's meat that you forgot to refrigerate.

Stapelia flowers are wondrous to behold, just like giant starfish, and when not flowering, the succulent stems make a moderate ground cover in very well-draining soil. *Huernia* flowers, though available in many different forms, are generally smaller and may resemble a hard candy.

One of the world's most famous plants, the parasitic *Rafflesia* — an oddball for many reasons — also uses the rotten meat olfactory mimicry tactic to lure insects.

Even fungi are in on the act, like the latticed stinkhorn mushrooms (*Clathrus* sp.) we find on mulch after rains. Many of these fungi are also a maroon color similar to many of the stinky flowers. A possible resemblance to raw meat, or am I reading too much into the trickery?

There are so many other foul-smelling flowers. Why bother with them at all? Because they are

achingly beautiful plant oddities, great fun examples of pollination strategies, and great fun when you encourage someone to "stop and smell the pretty flowers."

Kenneth Setzer is writer and editor at Fairchild Tropical Botanic Garden.

Huernia is a tough succulent with small, attractive flowers. Kenneth Setzer FAIRCHILD TROPICAL BOTANIC GARDEN

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