

# Jack-in-the-Pulpit

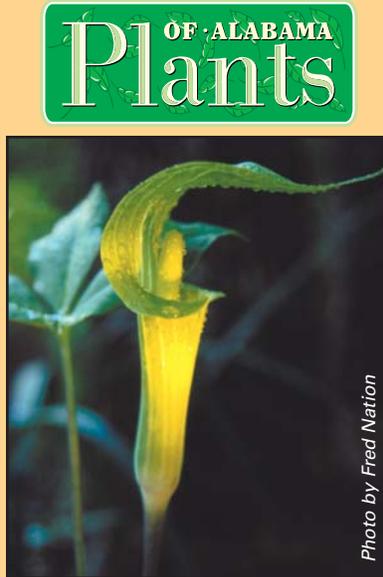
*Arisaema triphyllum* (L.)

By *Fred Nation*, Educator, Baldwin County

**J**ack-in-the-pulpit (also known as Indian Turnip) is an upright herbaceous perennial, to about 3 feet tall, in the *Arum* family, *Araceae*. The leaves are pinnately divided into three, occasionally five elliptic or ovate segments. In late winter or early spring, flowers consist of a long, cylindrical spadix, surrounded by a tubular, encircling spathe. The spathe is variably striped, colored purple, brown, or green, with a pointed hood that arches over the spadix. The fruit is a cluster of berries, green, becoming bright red when ripe. Below ground there is an oval, fleshy, root-like corm.

*Arisaema triphyllum* is one of a group of plants called “ephemerals.” They bloom in late winter or early spring, when they can get a crack at the sunlight, to make and store food before leaves form on the trees and shrubs above. When the shading forest canopy has leafed out, the ephemerals have already completed their life cycles for the year. Since they are in a hurry, their flowers are typically quite showy, to attract pollinators during their brief flowering period. Trilliums and trailing arbutus are other examples of conspicuous, early-flowering spring ephemerals.

The reproductive strategy of Jack-in-the-pulpit is amazing. The small flowers grow separately on the central rod-shaped spadix, with male flowers above, and females below. The plant somehow “decides” to be a functional male or a female. One set of



flowers matures, while those of the other sex usually do not develop to maturity. Plants that end up as females produce the fruits, which look like large ripe strawberries lying on the leaf litter in the fall. By then the rest of the plant has died back and withered away for the year. The strongest plants, with the most stored energy, seem to become females. Weaker individuals either “decide” to be males, or they do not flower at all. So, the best and strongest of the Jacks are actually Jills! Each plant can change functional gender from year to year. This year’s male or non-flowering individual may store enough energy to flower and set fruits as a female next year.

The fleshy corms of Jack-in-the-pulpit were gathered as staples by some Indian tribes, but they are edible only after being thoroughly dried or roasted. The raw corms and all parts of the plant contain calcium oxalate crystals, which are extremely irritating and corrosive to mucous membranes of the mouth and throat. The powdered or grated root was prescribed medically as a diaphoretic, to induce sweating, as an expectorant, which expels phlegm, and as a counter-irritant. This last usage is an interesting extension of the Doctrine of Signatures, which states that “like cures like;” if it is irritated or inflamed, irritate it with a counter-irritant. For example, a congested chest might be treated with a mustard-plaster. Sore joints, boils, or even venomous bites were counter-irritated with mustard oil, the juice from hot peppers, or with the raw, grated corm of Jack-in-the-pulpit. *Arisaema triphyllum* was official in the United States Pharmacopoeia from 1820 to 1873.

Other members of the *Arum* family are gold club (*Orontium aquaticum*), the rare spoonflower (*Peltandra sagittifolia*), and the invasive exotic, wild tarot (*Colocasia esculenta*). Jack-in-the-pulpit, the most famous member of the family, is not as common as it once was, but it can still be found in rich, moist hardwood forests throughout Alabama. It is one of our most distinctive plants, and one of our most beloved and interesting wildflowers. 🌿



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