



Encyclopedia of Life

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## Corpse Flowers Podcast and “Meet the Scientist” *Amorphophallus*

Let's face it—when you think of charismatic megaflora, chances are you have in mind something majestic, like a towering Sequoia, or something ancient, like a Joshua tree. But a plant with a four-foot stalk that smells like a cross between rotting stinky cheese and animal feces? This week's podcast takes us to a sacred island off the coast of Madagascar, where an intrepid botanist braved fever and worse to bring a specimen of this unlikely botanical superstar back alive.

### Transcript

**Ari:** From the Encyclopedia of Life, this is One Species at a Time. I'm Ari Daniel Shapiro. Just inside this tropical greenhouse at the University of Utah is a potted plant.

**Wahlert:** This is it.

**Ari:** Gregory Wahlert traveled over 10,000 miles to bring it back from Madagascar. He really wanted that thing, but you'd never suspect it was worth all the trouble he had to go through. It looks kinda...ordinary. Two dull brown buds snake upwards out of the dry, rocky soil in the pot. But Wahlert had his reasons. To understand his thinking, we have to rewind the clock. Wahlert's a botanist, and in 2006 he was collecting tree violets in Madagascar. A few miles off the northwest coast sits a tiny island called Nosy Ankarea.

**Wahlert:** This small island is a block of basalt lava that has just risen up out of the Indian Ocean.

**Ari:** Wahlert wanted to look for violets there, but he couldn't just show up with his shovel and a plant press. The island is sacred.

**Wahlert:** For maybe centuries, the Sakalav ethnic group had buried their rulers – their kings, if you like – on this island. And so before we could go collecting, we had to ask permission from the village elders.

**Ari:** Earlier in the field season, Wahlert had learned this lesson the hard way in a different part of Madagascar. He'd wandered off into a forest without telling anyone, eager to find his violets. But he terrified a local woman who thought she'd seen a vampire.

**Wahlert:** A vampire is tall, white, blue eyes, and bearded, which matched my description.

**Ari:** So Wahlert made sure that this time, for the sacred island, he asked permission from the village elders to collect plants. Ultimately, he got it. Wahlert packed up his supplies and camping gear, and hired a local boat to take him over.

**Wahlert:** Up on top, the soil is very thin and extremely rocky, and it's very hot – bone dry.

**Ari:** And yet, he found his tree violets. But not that's all.

**Wahlert:** But I also found this other plant in full bloom growing all over the place. Spectacular, charismatic plants.

**Ari:** And what makes a plant charismatic?

**Wahlert:** A beautiful flower, uh, maybe some sort of scent.

**Ari:** And this plant had both. Sitting atop each plant's four-foot tall tan and purple stalk was a short stack of dozens of tiny black and yellow flowers, which were tucked inside a purple polka-dotted leafy sheath. And then bursting out of those flower stacks – a pale green, foot-long, suggestive-looking – well, maybe it's best to trot out the genus name here. *Amorphophallus*.

**Wahlert:** Kind of an X-rated botanical name. It means misshapen phallus.

**Ari:** And that's exactly what it looks like. The very top of this phallic part of the plant looks as if it started to melt, and then re-solidified. And it reeks.

**Wahlert:** Kinda smells like cheesy – rotting cheese, but when you get your nose down in there, it smells like a, a cross between feces and carrion. It's really an awful smell.

**Ari:** So in this case, the smell may not be exactly charismatic to us, but to insects – it's pure bliss.

**Wahlert:** They trick the insects into thinking they're landing on a dead carcass. So the insects crawl around on the flowers, and then they fly away, and they're tricked again to another flower. And in this way, these plants can cross-pollinate.

**Ari:** So, anyway, back to the sacred island – Wahlert saw numerous patches of these plants in full bloom – their stinky flowers on display. And then, his first night on the island, he fell ill with malaria.

**Wahlert:** At first I just thought it was just an extremely bad fever. So I, I sweated it out, like, 3 days in the shade of a fig tree on the beach. I had spent so much money, and so much effort to get to these islands, I was gonna at least do something. And so I staggered around, and did a little bit of collecting.

**Ari:** Finally, he had to get off the island to receive treatment. But he brought one sample with him. After returning to the United States, he showed it to the world's expert on this genus of plants.

**Wahlert:** And he instantly recognized it as a new species.

**Ari:** That fired Wahlert up to go back the next year to collect more samples – to describe this new species for science. He cut and dried several of the flowering stalks. Those stalks grow out of large, 40-50 pound underground tubers – so he dug up about a dozen of those as well to distribute to various greenhouses and herbaria across the US and Europe. Including the one at the University of Utah. It was at a different phase of its life cycle when I was there, so I didn't see the plant in all its smelly and lurid glory.

What have you decided to name this one?

**Wahlert:** We are going to name it after a famous French botanist, and his name was Perrier. So... *Amorphophallus perrieri*.

**Ari:** Perrier had already brought a specimen of this plant back to Paris in the 1930s. He just never got around to naming it. The fact that it took almost 80 years for someone to discover that someone had already discovered this plant – shows just how much inventory there is in the tropics to classify and how few people there are who are actually doing the classifying. It should be noted that the main reason this plant was still discoverable in this millennium was that the island of Nosy Ankarea is sacred and undisturbed. That's not the case for most of this region.

**Wahlert:** The surrounding islands are almost completely cut down, burned down. What little left is going fast. There's huge places in the tropics that are being destroyed quicker than the plants and animals can be described.

**Ari:** And so Gregory Wahlert is on an urgent mission – to find as many plants as he can, and to document, collect, classify...and protect them.

**Ari:** Visit our website – eol.org, to see photos of the *Amorphophallus perrieri* plants growing in Madagascar and in the Utah greenhouse. If you're a collector of plants and have some photos or specimens to share, let us know – eol.org.

Our series, One Species at a Time, is produced by Atlantic Public Media in Woods Hole, Massachusetts. I'm Ari Daniel Shapiro.

## Meet the Scientist

Meet scientist Greg Wahlert, featured in the Corpse Flower podcast:



### **Where do you work?**

Postdoctoral researcher at the University of Utah, Department of Biology, Salt Lake City, UT, USA.

### **What do you study?**

I study the diversity, taxonomy, and evolutionary relationships of plants, especially *Solanum* (tomatoes), *Rinorea* (tree violets), and *Arctostaphylos* (manzanitas).

### **What are three title you would give yourself?**

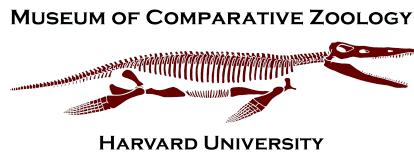
Botanist, conservationist, teacher.

### **What do you do when you are not working?**

I enjoy getting out into natural areas to hike, camp, and explore, which provides the best opportunity to be among the wild plants and animals living freely in their environment. So much of practicing biology involves computers, laboratories, and looking at museum specimens, but it is interacting directly with nature that rejuvenates me and reminds me why I wanted to become a botanist in the first place. I also like to explore the lesser traveled areas, here at home or abroad, in search of wilderness, solitude, or authentic experiences with other cultures and foreign landscapes.

**What do you like most about science?**

I like most discovering new things about the plant world that were previously unknown. Doing taxonomy and describing new species is personally rewarding, as those efforts contribute to the greater understanding of Earth's biodiversity and may help with conservation efforts. I also take pleasure in bringing students out into the field and seeing their interest and curiosity in the natural world around them.



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