

## **Doon Watch Nature Series for Dehradun Live Hindustan Times by Sanjay Sondhi**

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### The S-S-S-Snake Plant

Last week, I had accompanied a group of girls from the Welham Girls School on a nature walk near the Shiv mandir, just off Sahastradhara Road near the IT Park. Being in the forest with a bunch of enthusiastic, eager-to-learn nature lovers was invigorating. During the course of the walk, I asked the girls what they wanted to see in the forest. Sir, we want to see a snake, replied the girls in chorus. A snake, with a large group of girls in the forest—bad idea, I thought to myself. As a compromise, I told the girls that I would show them the Snake Plant. Our search for the Snake Plant proved futile, and ended in disappointment, despite my having seen the plant in the same area only a week earlier. The plant had already flowered, and all that remained were a cluster of green fruiting berries. I had promised the girls that I would show them a picture of the flowering plant, so I do hope they read this article.

The Snake Plant (*Arisaema tortuosum*) or the Whipcord Cobra Lily, as it is also called, is an interesting plant belonging to the Arum family. Numerous species of plants in this family grow in various parts of India, from the temperate Himalayas to the tropical moist forests of the Western Ghats.

The Snake Plant is characterised by a large leaf or bract, which grows in the shape of the hood of a cobra. The bract encircles a small cluster of tiny, inconspicuous flowers. The spadix (or the cluster of flowers) ends in a long curving appendage, which looks like the tongue of a snake.

The Snake Plant has a menacing look about it and a small shiver went through me when I first saw the plant. For starters, the cobra-like hood of the plant seemed follow me, even as I observed the plant from different angles. The yellow coloured appendage snaked out ominously from the plant's hood. Swaying in the breeze, the appendage truly resembled the tongue of a snake. Despite marveling at the plant's mimicry, I was intimidated by its cobra-like appearance. On many Snake Plants, even the stem of the plant, is blotched with spots, giving it an even more snake-like appearance, hence perfecting its camouflage.



Photograph caption: The Snake Plant intimidating the author!  
An unusual feature of all *Arisaema* species is that the sex of the plant

changes during its life. The plant is normally a male when small, but based on its food and genetics, it can change its sex to become a female or a hermaphrodite (having male and female sex organs). Do plants have feelings? If yes, this must be one confused plant, having to deal with very conflicting feelings over its life cycle!

This species, *Arisaema tortuosum*, is normally seen at higher altitudes in temperate forests of the Himalayas and seeing it in the Doon Valley was unusual. I was left wondering whether its occurrence here was just a chance or the impact of climate change and global warming.

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Making a difference: Climate change is a reality. The CO<sub>2</sub> level in the atmosphere has crossed 350 ppm, which is often referred to as the “tipping point”, beyond which impacts of global warming could have dire consequences for Mother Earth. 24 October 2009 is the International Day of Climate Action-so make your contribution. If you need help, visit [www.350.org](http://www.350.org) for ideas and actions.