

May Showers Bring Fungi



BROOKINGS, S.D. - Spring is a time when many intrepid mushroom hunters head out to their secret spots in search of mushrooms, particularly the highly prized morels. Morel mushrooms are especially desirable for their delicious taste and also because they are relatively rare, at least in the prairie where we live.

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desirable for their delicious taste and also because they are relatively rare, at least in the prairie where we live.

Morel mushrooms prefer to grow in hardwood forests, usually around the stumps of old dead trees, especially American elm. Here in South Dakota, they may be found along the Missouri and Big Sioux rivers as well. Since we don't have many hardwood forests and most of the elms are long gone, finding morels can be pretty challenging. If someone does find some, they will probably keep their location a secret, kind of like

that favorite fishing-hole or that productive patch of wild asparagus.

How to identify a morel from other mushrooms

Morels are only found for a few weeks in the spring of the year, usually after a good soaking rain. They can be found by the dozens in a good spot, essentially growing up overnight. They typically grow about 2 to 5-inches tall and are about 1 to 2-inches in diameter. The brown or gray caps have a distinctive wavy, brain-like appearance. If you cut one in half from top to bottom it should be completely hollow inside.

If all of these characteristics match up with what you find, then you can be pretty sure that you have morels. But, if the mushrooms you find are filled with feathery membranes inside or you find something that sort of looks like a morel but you don't find it until mid-summer or fall, it is not a morel. Morels are considered to be one of the "fool-proof" of wild mushrooms since the identifying characteristics are quite straight forward.

Shaggy Mane
Another mushroom that is easily identified and also one of the fool-proof-four are the Shaggy Mane mushrooms. They are common in lawns, growing to 6-inches in height and up to 2-inches in diameter. The surface of the caps look "shaggy" because they have scales of tissue that hang off the side. The caps are densely filled with gills that start out white but

later turn gray, then to black as they age. Shaggy mane mushrooms will appear in small, somewhat loosely spaced clusters.

Inky caps are smaller mushrooms and even more common in lawns, again around the stumps of old trees or even close to where a stump was ground out. The fungus feeds on the decaying roots beneath the soil. These too will pop up overnight following a good rain. These emerge in clusters of tightly bunched small mushrooms about 1-inch in diameter in groups 3 to 6-inches around.

Initially the caps are white but later turn tan to light brown. Beneath the caps are gills that start out white but later turn gray and eventually black. The name "inky cap" refers to the dark color of the gills and that after a few days these patches of mushrooms turn into an inky-black mass of desiccated mushrooms.

The shaggy manes are considered to be quite edible but should be harvested and eaten while they are young and the gills are still white. If you harvest some, it is best to eat them right away because you cannot store them for long or they will deteriorate into the same inky mess they become in your lawn. The inky caps can also be eaten but with caution. One species can cause poisoning symptoms if eaten within 24 hours of consuming alcohol. So it is best to probably stick with the much larger shaggy manes.

Most people consider

inky caps a real eye-sore in their lawn leading to lots of questions on how to get rid of them. Since the mycelium or "body" of the mushroom is actually beneath the soil, growing through and feeding on the decaying old roots and stumps of dead trees, getting rid of them permanently is no easy task. It would likely mean a large-scale excavation process to get out all of the old wood and even then they might come back for a year or two. The best thing to do is use a stiff rake to get them out of the lawn and dispose of them.

Puffballs and chicken-of-the-woods

The other two mushrooms considered to be members of the fool-proof-four are the puffballs and chicken-of-the-woods mushrooms.

Chicken-of-the-woods is a shelf-type mushroom that grows on the sides of trees, usually mid-summer to fall. It is bright yellow to orange and has pores on the undersides of the shelves instead of gills like the shaggy manes have.

Try to harvest this mushroom when it is young, brightly colored and has a soft texture. As it ages the color pales and the mushroom develops a tough texture. Some people say that it does taste like chicken when cooked.

The fourth mushroom is the puffball. This mushroom is also fairly common mid-summer to fall. You may find them growing in your lawn or shelterbelt. They

can range in size from that of a golf ball to a basketball. These are completely white inside and out when they first grow but will turn tan and eventually brown as they age.

Harvest them while they are still white. Peel off the outer layer, then slice up the inner "meat." The texture of these is kind of like eggplant, and like eggplant, it picks up the flavor of what it is cooked with. When fully mature and dried out puffballs develop a hole near the top. If you kick them at this stage you will see clouds of spores fly out.

When in doubt, throw out

Even though we say these are the fool-proof four, one should always be careful and follow some of the old sayings like: "when in doubt, throw it out" or "there are old mushroom hunters; there are bold mushroom hunters; but there are no old, bold mushroom hunters."

Wild mushrooms can certainly be delicious but there also those that are considered non-edible because of texture or flavor and then there are those that are mildly poisonous to deadly.

Never eat anything that you are not sure of. Even if you are sure, but have not eaten a particular mushroom before, start with a small amount and see how it affects you. You might just be allergic or have a reaction to a particular species, just as

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