

## Of The Outdoors

# Tips For Huntings 'Shrooms, Asparagus

BY GARY HOWEY  
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This is the time of the year when Mother Nature's Garden starts to grow and mature.

Unlike other gardeners, Mother Nature doesn't see the need to plant her garden in nice neat rows like we do.

When gardeners see weeds and grasses growing in their garden, out comes the hoe, not Mother Nature as she has the right plan, allowing anything and everything to grow in her garden.

Now is the time that we hunters can hit the field, sandbars and wooded areas without a gun and still bring home something for dinner.

It's morel and asparagus picking time in the upper Midwest, when both of these delectable edibles will poke their heads above the ground, just waiting for someone like you or I to come along and pluck them from the earth.

Don't forget, with any type of hunting or picking we need to get permission of the landowner before entering their land.

### MOREL MUSHROOMS

Morels generally appear prior to wild asparagus and can be found throughout our area, they are easy to recognize, delicious to eat, making them the most popular wild mushroom in the upper Midwest.

Elongated with an off white stem and a crown, covered with white ridges and dark brown pits, the morel mushroom are easily recognized.

Varying in color from light gray to dark gray, light tan to golden brown, pale yellow to yellow to dark brown, look for something growing on the ground resembling a cone shaped brain.

Morels start to pop out in mid- to late-April, with the best hunting or picking happening when temperatures hit the mid 50s and warmer.

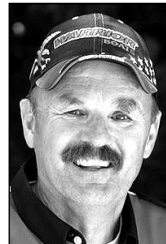
In the upper Midwest there are several indicators that mushroom hunters use, to help them to know when the morels should be coming up.

If you have a lilac bush, crab apple tree or violets growing in your area, keep an eye on them, when they're blooming, it's a good sign you'll find morels.

I've always found morels to be up in good quantities around the week that Mother's Day falls on, which is this week.

Other pickers use the almanac to give them a clue as to when morels will appear.

They find the average date for the last frost; add two weeks to that date and that should put



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you close to the peak of the morel season.

Moisture, sunshine along with warmer temperatures has a lot to do with when morels appear.

A week of 60-degree daytime temperatures after the frost is gone with no freezing temperatures at night will generally be a good time start looking for morels.

Along with warm temperatures, moisture is also important. Many mushroom hunters say that the best time to hunt for morels is after a rain, when temperatures are around 60 degrees with a high humidity.

Morels can be found earliest in sandy areas, on south facing slopes or in fields that have been burnt as these areas warm up quickly and retain heat longer.

You'll find the earliest morels on islands in the river, especially in sandy areas and areas where there are dead or dying trees.

The first morel is always the toughest to locate because they blend very well with the forest or vegetated ground. Once you've found one, kneel down, looking closely because morels are like schooling fish, if you find one you'll generally find a bunch.

My preferred method for locating mushrooms isn't real scientific; it's the old meandering method, picking my way through the vegetation until I spot one.

It's a good idea to stop from

time to time and kneel down, getting a better view of the area as many times as morels will be pushing up through the leaves and can be very visible.

Because mushrooms reproduce through spores that need to be returned to the ground in order to grow. In order to allow the morels to throw their spores, it's not a bad idea to use collection bags that are porous such as onion bags or some type of a bag that allows the spores to be released back into the air.

Once you've found a mess of mushrooms, they need to be cleaned up and prepared.

The first thing that you'll want to do is to split the mushroom in half from the top to the bottom. The rinse them off over running water as the crooks and crannies of the mushroom may contain sand or insects. After you've rinsed them thoroughly, you'll want them set in water for a short period of time in order to flush sand, debris or stubborn insects out of them.

Don't let them soak in water for an extended period of time as they will soak up the water and become spongy.

Then the best part of morel hunting begins, preparing and eating them.

There are numerous ways to prepare morels including, fried and in mushroom soup. One of my favorite ways to prepare the morels is to fry them up in some type of batter.

Morels are best when prepared fresh, but if you have a good mushroom hunting season and would like to preserve or save some of them for future use, mushrooms can be dried, frozen or blanched.

### WILD ASPARAGUS

Wild asparagus appears about the same time as mushrooms, but I've had my best luck finding the more mature spears after mushroom picking is done when temperatures begin to warm up.

Don't rely on the asparagus growing in your neighbor's garden, as it will appear later as gardens are clean and generally contain darker soil, causing the ground in a garden to warm up more quickly.

The ground that wild asparagus grows in is covered with last years grasses, plants and debris, keeping it from warm up as quickly, because of this wild asparagus may not come up as early as that found in a clean garden.

Look for last years plants that have gone to seed, they are more of a golden color clump or bush, and resembling dried up tumbleweed. You'll find the new growth sprouting in amongst last year's plant.

Once you've found your first asparagus shoot, scout the area carefully as the seeds of the older plants may have been dropped or blown a short distance from the original plant.

The best places to look for wild asparagus is along fence lines, power lines, old railroad right of ways and places birds might land or congregate.

In the fall when asparagus goes to seed, birds will pick the seeds off the plants, fly off and pass the hard pit or seed which drops on the ground and if conditions are right, a new asparagus plant will pop up.

Asparagus, like morels need warm soil and moisture to grow, so sandy areas along fence lines seem to be one of those areas where asparagus comes up first.

If you find asparagus along a fence line, and there is a shelter-belt/tree planting near by, be sure to check them out closely as the birds will have set in the trees and may have deposited seeds in these areas.

Since asparagus gets woody, it's best to harvest the tender shoots; this doesn't mean that the larger taller stems won't be edible.

On the larger stems, it's best to grab them by the top, bending it until it snaps, as it will separate or break off at the woody part of the stem.

Cleaning asparagus is easy, simply cut off the dried up end, rinse and prepare.

I'm one of the few who enjoy asparagus in my family, so I won't have much competition when it comes to preparing and eating fresh asparagus.

To prepare it, I simply boil it until tender; top it with some butter substitute, a little Mrs. Dash or other seasoning and then pig out.

Morel and asparagus hunting are excellent ways to get outside and to not only enjoy the outdoors but to also enjoy the bounties that Mother Nature provides.

Gary Howey Hartington, Neb., is a former tournament angler, hunting and fishing guide. His *Outdoorsmen Adventures* television series [www.outdoorsmenadventures.com](http://www.outdoorsmenadventures.com) can be seen throughout the upper Midwest.

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