

Naturalists' Notes

Marvellous Mushrooms

When fall arrives in the Powell River area, certifiably sane people are gripped with an overwhelming urge to scour the forest floor. They are searching for the elusive mushrooms for which Japanese gourmands happily pay more than \$50 a pound. Pine mushrooms command the best price, but the beautiful chanterelles, with their distinctive scent reminiscent of apricots, are also in demand.

Many people hesitate to eat wild mushrooms, quite justifiably. There are numerous species of toxic mushrooms, some deadly. For example, morels are delicious edible fungi; false morels are packed with a chemical that is also the basis of rocket fuel. Moreover, studies suggest that the toxins found in poisonous mushrooms can be cumulative; you're fine until the last time, and then you're on your way to the emergency ward.

How can you tell if a mushroom is poisonous? The answer is—you can't. Unless you know what it is, don't eat it. BC's Poison Control Centre gets too many mushroom calls each year as it is. Stick with what you know is safe. The readily-identifiable, round, all-white puffballs are edible. For something different, try a puffball pizza. Slice the middle from a young puffball (if there's a hint of yellow—throw it away). That's the crust. Brush on tomato sauce, sprinkle with cheese, and bake in the oven until the cheese melts and the mushroom is cooked.

But mushrooms have a higher purpose than that of a side dish, however tasty. They are one of nature's efficient recyclers, breaking down dead wood and leaves. Only a small part of a mushroom is visible. Most of it is growing underground, forming what is called the mycelium. It's the mycelium part of the mushroom that gives off enzymes that break down dead material in the environment. Without mushrooms, the forest would be covered in logs piled high with leaves, and the nutrients in the dead plant matter would not be recycled back into the soil for other plants and animals to use.

Mushrooms also play a critical role in ensuring that living trees remain alive. Again it's the invisible part, the mycelium, that does the work. The mycelium brings essential nutrients and water to the roots and, in turn, the mushrooms survive on the excess sugar produced by the trees. Without the mushrooms' mycelium, the trees would die. Without the trees, the mushrooms would die. Nature, including mushrooms, is marvellous.

This article was written by Sharon Thomas for the Malaspina Naturalists Club. For more information on local flora readers can contact the Malaspina Naturalist Club at 604.485.6134.