

Purdue Extension Does...Wild Mushrooms

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March 30, 2018

There are over 2,000 kinds of wild mushrooms in the Midwest. Some are poisonous while some are edible and delicious when properly prepared. The edibility of the majority is either not known or they are not considered for food because of their small size or poor flavor or texture.

Even though not everyone is interested in collecting mushrooms to eat, it is important to understand most have an important and beneficial role in the environment. They grow in a wide variety of habitats. Most of the mushrooms seen on a walk through a woods are beneficial. Many species are quite specific about their food source and will be found only under or near certain kinds of trees - some under pines, others under oak, etc. Some are important as decay organisms, aiding in the breakdown of logs, leaves, stems and other organic debris. This important role of mushrooms results in recycling of essential nutrients. Some mushrooms grow in, and form their fruiting structures on, living trees causing decay of the sapwood or of the heartwood. Many woodland mushrooms are essential to the good growth and even survival of trees. They establish a relationship with roots of living trees that is mutually beneficial. These are called mycorrhizal mushrooms. All mushrooms, whether poisonous or edible, can be admired for their beauty and fantastic variety of form, color and texture.

Which Mushrooms are Safe to Eat?

Some edible mushrooms are very similar in appearance to poisonous kinds and may grow in the same habitat. Edible mushrooms are known to be safe to eat because they have been eaten frequently with no ill effects. Poisonous mushrooms are known because someone ate them and became ill or died. There is no test or characteristic to distinguish edible from poisonous mushrooms. This indicates a need to identify with certainty one of several of the proven edible species and pick and eat only those positively identified. At the same time, you should also learn to identify some of the common poisonous mushrooms, especially those that are similar to edible kinds. It is especially important to learn the characteristics of the Amanita mushrooms, since several of the species common in Indiana are poisonous, a few causing serious illness and sometimes death.

The word "toadstool" is often used to indicate a poisonous mushroom. Since there is no way to distinguish between a so-called "toadstool" and an edible mushroom it is more precise to speak of poisonous mushrooms or edible mushrooms.

The season for collecting wild mushrooms for food begins in late March and early April when the first morel or sponge mushrooms are found. These choice edible mushrooms are most

abundant during April and the first two weeks of May. The false morels (members of the *Gyromitra* genus) are found at this same time of the year, but they must be regarded as poisonous and not collected for eating. It is true that many have eaten false morels with no apparent ill effects. However, recent research has shown toxins to be present in some of the false morels that can cause death or serious illness. Do not eat the false morels.

Edible vs. Poisonous - True or False

- Poisonous mushrooms tarnish a silver spoon. False
- If it peels, you can eat it. False
- All mushrooms growing on wood are edible. False
- Mushrooms that squirrels or other animals eat are safe for humans. False
- All mushrooms in meadows and pastures are safe to eat. False
- All white mushrooms are safe. False (In the Midwest, the most common "deadly" mushrooms are white.)
- Poisonous mushrooms can be detoxified by parboiling, drying or pickling. False

Tips For Collecting Wild Mushrooms

- Be sure of your identification - eat only kinds known to be edible.
- Do not eat mushrooms raw.
- Eat only mushrooms in good condition.
- Eat only one kind at a time and do not eat large amounts.
- Eat only a small amount the first time; even morels, generally considered to be excellent, may cause illness in some persons.
- Don't experiment. There is an old saying, "There are old mushroom hunters, and bold mushroom hunters, but there are no old, bold mushroom hunters."

For additional information on collecting and identifying wild mushrooms as well as numerous color photographs on Midwestern mushrooms, check out the free Ohio State University publication "Wild Mushrooms" at <https://ohioline.osu.edu/factsheet/HYG-3303> .

If you would like more information on this or other residential topics, please contact Purdue Extension – Dubois County at 812-482-1782 or kjeck@purdue.edu.



Morel mushroom (*Morchella*). Edible species in Midwest from late March to mid-May.
(Photo courtesy of W. Sturgeon)