



ON THE TOADSTOOL TRAIL

Gardening editor Alice Whitehead uncovers the feast of fungi to be foraged in the UK's woodlands this month and gets expert advice on capturing, cultivating and cooking your own.

If you go down to the woods today, you're sure of a big surprise. No, not picnicking bears, but the awe-inspiring appearance of another fairytale phenomenon. From amethyst deceivers and chicken-of-the-woods to slippery jacks and scarlet elf cups, wild mushrooms can turn craggy tree stumps and humus-rich nooks and crannies into a Disney *Fantasia*. In fact, our woodlands and meadows are home to almost 15,000 marvellous mushrooms, with around 300 edible varieties – and, in October, they are ripe for the picking.

An enchanting world

For seasoned 'shroom' stalker Fred Gillam, aka 'Fred the Forager', who runs Wild Side of Life foraging courses in his home county of Wiltshire, mushroom foraging has become a way of life.

'There are very few days when I don't go out to provide mushrooms for the table – I eat at least 100 species,' says Fred. 'There are mushrooms that taste of marzipan; purple ones you can pickle in vodka; giant puffballs that weigh 8lb which can be stuffed with vegetables and slow-baked; little aquamarine-coloured funnels that impart a powerful aniseed flavour, and others that can be ground into a powder akin to chilli. The diversity of flavour, texture and gastronomic potential in wild mushrooms is unbelievable.'

Fred's passion for these noble roots stems from his rural upbringing in the Wiltshire countryside, on an estate where his father was head gardener. 'I developed an early fascination with all things "nature", and at 14 was out on an early morning autumn cycle ride with a friend when we spotted some truly enormous mushrooms towering above the dewy meadow grass,' he recalls. 'I felt

as if I'd opened a door on to an enchanting world – and as it turned out that's exactly what I had done. On discovering my first parasol mushrooms, I'd started off on a very long and rewarding journey.'

Foraging secrets

While Fred doesn't have a favourite place to forage (the location of the best mushrooms can vary year to year), he does have favourite varieties and of the 300 edible species, he suggests only 100 are worth seeking out. 'There are plenty of mushrooms you can eat but many of them lack flavour, or simply don't taste like food at all!' he says.

On one of his immersive, four-day Secret Sunday Mushroom Clubs (the location of which is kept quiet until the last minute, so Fred can seek out the best blooms), pickings can include everything from umbrella-



shaped bay boletes and meaty chanterelles to oysters, pungent porcini (or ceps) – some weighing up to 3lb – and his granddad's favourite: the blue-lilac wood blewit. 'If you know what you're doing in October, your basket should never be empty!' he says.

But even experienced mushroom hunters like Fred remember the golden rule when seeking out these spore-bearing fruits. 'An old mushroom hunter once said to me: "There are old mushroom hunters, there are bold mushroom hunters, but there are no old, bold, mushroom hunters!" If you're serious about wanting to learn to hunt for and cook wild mushrooms, then don't try to do it from books alone. There are many poisonous species and a couple of dozen that can make you seriously ill. One tiny mistake could cost you your life, so it's essential to find a good tutor.'

Not just a tasty meal...

Earthy but almost unearthly, tasty but also toxic; these beguiling blooms might be a gourmet gem but they also have far-reaching potential beyond the harvesting basket.





'I've been studying them for 32 years, but each year I continue to learn,' says Fred. 'We seldom see fungi unless we notice their fruit – the mushroom part – and yet 85 per cent of all land plants are dependent on fungi. Mushrooms are now being used in medicine to cure some of the world's toughest diseases, to clear up pollution spills, and even to grow new alternatives to plastics.'

'They play an enormously important, yet unseen role in breaking down nature's big organic molecules and feeding the by-products to the plant kingdom. Without fungi, we would all starve.'

HOW TO EAT...

Our experts suggest the fungi to find and feast on at your local farmers' market this autumn.

Fred Gillam recommends...

The cultivated king oyster. Excellent sliced and gently sautéed with herbs and garlic. Add a splash of balsamic vinegar and stir for 3-4 minutes before serving.

Andy Overall recommends...

Chanterelles or ceps. Cook on a high heat to remove excess moisture and set aside. Add some white wine to the pan, reduce down and add a little butter, along with the mushrooms and a dash of crème fraîche. Or fry thin slithers of chicken-of-the-wood in butter until brown and serve as chips!



FORAGING TIPS

- Don't forage without the landowner's permission and check local conservation bylaws.
- Don't rely on books or the internet when foraging. 'If in doubt, leave it out,' says Andy Overall, who runs Fungi To be With courses and events in London. 'Don't eat anything unless you are 100 per cent sure of what you have: 99 per cent is not good enough. Always go out with an experienced expert.'
- Don't use plastic carrier bags to take your find home. 'It's a cardinal sin, as the mushrooms sweat and turn smelly and slimy,' says Fred.

BE SAFE, GO ON A COURSE

Fred the Forager: www.thewildsideoflife.co.uk

Andy Overall: www.fungitobewith.org



GET KITTED OUT!

● Fungi Futures are offering three GroCycle mushroom kits to readers. To enter, go to www.vegetarianliving.co.uk/offers. Competition closes midday 29 September 2015.

● The Espresso Mushroom Company is offering 15% off Kitchen Garden mushroom kits to *Vegetarian Living* readers. Simply enter discount code 'LIVING15' at the online checkout at www.espressomushroom.co.uk.



PROJECT HOW TO GROW...

Safer than foraging, it's easy to grow your own mushrooms. Here's how to get started.

Books and bog rolls



DIY The perfect use for your *Fifty Shades of Grey*: oyster or shiitake mushrooms will happily colonise a good paperback (and a bad one too), as well as unused toilet rolls. Dip the paper in hot water (to pasteurise) and, once cooled, 'inoculate' by crumbling the spawn (order from www.mushroombox.co.uk) over the top and inside.

Pop in a specialist growbag (www.mushroomgrowingbags.co.uk) and mist and aerate each day. Ready in two weeks.

SHOP Buy ready-made kits from www.rusticmushrooms.co.uk or www.annforfungi.co.uk.

Coffee grounds

DIY Already pasteurised thanks to the brewing process, spent coffee offers a less fussy growing medium. With clean hands, mix 2.5kg coffee with 500g spawn and pour into a growbag. Once the contents go white, cut open and allow the mushrooms to form.

SHOP Get kits from Fungi Futures (www.grocycle.com) or the Espresso Mushroom Company (www.espressomushroom.co.uk), which both reuse coffee waste from local cafés.

Log and dowel

DIY Buy dowels impregnated with spawn (www.annforfungi.co.uk) and plant into hardwood logs (e.g. beech, oak or birch). Drill three rows of holes 15cm apart down the length and push the dowels in so they are flush with the surface. Seal with wax and keep somewhere shady. Look out for small white nodes over four or five weeks.

SHOP Source ready-to-fruit logs from www.organiccatalogue.com.

