

# Fungi Phobia

Contributed by Daniel Butler

Our fields and woods are stuffed with valuable fungi, but most of us are too scared to experiment. This is a beginner's guide to edible fungi.

## Overcoming fungi phobia

Mushrooms are surely our most delicious and valuable wild crop, yet every year we leave them to rot by the tonne in our fields and woods. The fact is we are a nation of fungi-phobes, convinced that if a mushroom isn't uniform in shape and colour and wrapped in plastic, it is a deadly toadstool.

This is a tragedy because Britain has the perfect climate for fungi – damp and mild. Indeed, conditions here are much more suited to most species than the biting frosts of central Europe or the arid conditions in the Mediterranean. And only a fraction of the handful of us courageous enough to experiment with the fantastic flavours and textures growing in abundance along our hedgerows realise they are available around the year.

The complete opposite is true on the Continent where citizens rush out of cities at weekends to cash in on the rural bonanza. Most are picking for themselves, but the more enterprising sell the surplus. Throughout the spring, summer and autumn and market stalls across Poland, Italy and France groan with fungi of every conceivable colour, shape and aroma.

The picture is very different here, however, and you will be lucky indeed to find wild mushrooms on a local stall in even the poshest of food fairs. And just supposing you are fortunate enough to stumble across such a gem, you will find they have travelled hundreds, even thousands, of miles and have price tags to match their exotic origins.

This is a travesty, for if you go down to the woods today in search of a fungal surprise, you will find dozens of delicious species and, better still, face no competition for your prize for the vast majority of us seem convinced that all fungi can only mean a painful death. So how does one overcome this latent terror?

To begin with it's important to put things into perspective. Britain has some 2,000 species of fungi of which about 60 are seriously edible, 25 significantly poisonous. In other words, the vast majority are simply gastronomically boring. That still leaves thousands of mushrooms to bamboozle the beginner, but even the most ignorant novice can avoid the risks with a modicum of common sense and by following a few basic rules.

The first is to ignore old wives' tales about edible species looking 'good', being easy to peel, or poisonous varieties turning blue the touch of a penny. The destroying angel is one of our most beautiful mushrooms, you can peel a death cap and the bay bolete, one of the most delicious species, turns blue when cut.

No, positive identification is the only safe way of deciding what is good to eat and a good book is essential, while a human guide is an even better way of discovering the subject. Most Wildlife Trusts put on mushroom walks in the autumn, but these tend to look at all fungi rather than focus on the edible. More specialist edible mushroom breaks are now available and a quick check of the web should produce one tailored to your needs and pocket.

One good tip is to start with some of the more exotic looking mushrooms such as chicken of the woods or porcini. These are very distinctive and difficult to mistake for anything else. Ironically, it is the cautious who are the most frequent victims of mistaken identification because they head instead for the apparent safety of the familiar-looking field mushroom, only to pick yellow stainers by mistake. The latter are only mildly poisonous (in fact 50% of the population suffers no ill effects), but others get a nasty dose of vomiting and diarrhoea. This is an easy mistake to avoid, however. Yellow stainers live up to their name by discolouring: simply run your thumb firmly across the cap. If it bruises yellow or smells of carbolic, it is best avoided.

It is also important only to harvest those you have already provisionally identified with reasonable confidence. Back at home, armed with a glass of wine and a good field guide, even an expert needs time to identify a new variety with certainty. It is far worse for a beginner faced with a mixed basket, crammed with mushrooms of every shape, size, colour and condition. The result is that several hours later the bottle will be empty and you will be frustrated, confused and drunk. Worse, even if some of your haul is edible, you could also have picked a poisonous specimen and some are so unpleasant that they could have contaminated the rest.

Much the best course of action is to start by memorising the look and habitat of just one likely target and hunt solely for this, ignoring all else. Once you feel confident with one species, move on to the next – and with so many edible species currently at the height of their fruiting season, now is the perfect time to begin to build your repertoire.

Once discovered, mushroom hunting is huge fun and your autumns will be transformed forever. Far from cursing the cool wet weather, you will find yourself wishing for the rain that will prompt the fungal bonanza. Indeed, this is mushroom collecting's only serious risk; it is seriously addictive and it is easy to become over obsessed, spending hours combing damp lanes and crawling along leaf-strewn hedge bottoms.

### Storing mushrooms

**Drying:** This is easily the best way of storing firm species like porcini. Slice thinly and arrange on a wire rack in a warm place (such as above a radiator or in an airing cupboard). Or thread on cotton and hang in airy, warm, room. Once dry and crisp, they will keep for months or even years in an air-tight jar. To use soak in hot water for 15 minutes and use the liquid as stock.

**Freezing:** Because of their high water content, most mushrooms do not freeze well. Try sautéing delicate species like chanterelles with a little onion and garlic, then freeze in yoghurt pots and use to flavour casseroles throughout the winter.

**Bottling:** Whole mushrooms store well in oil. Wipe with a damp cloth and pack in jars, sprinkling with salt and then covering with oil. Place in a warm oven (90°C) for 10 minutes to pasteurise before sealing.

### Books on Fungi

Mushrooms and other Fungi of Britain and Europe by Roger Phillips et al. (Macmillan, £14.99) is the definitive guide, but The Collins Guide to Edible Mushrooms by Patrick Harding (Collins, £9.99) has the advantage of being pocket-sized and also shows look-alikes. The author publishes a free e-newsletter through the spring, summer and autumn and runs special mushroom picking breaks in Mid-Wales every September and October. For details visit [www.fungiforays.co.uk](http://www.fungiforays.co.uk) or phone 01597 811168.