

Top Ten Wild Mushrooms for the Beginner

Contributed by cab

Getting out to pick your first mushrooms can be a scary ordeal. You'll go home with a basket full of specimens, sit down and identify them best you can, be as sure as you can ever be that you're right about what they are, and then as likely as not you'll chuck them on to the compost heap.

In order to put your mind at rest a little, here's a short list of the ten mushrooms that I consider to be the easiest to identify. Go through the process of identifying them with a good guide book or two anyway, as it's a good exercise, and as the advice I give here is in no way meant to supplant that process. I'm more trying to give you a little more confidence to take the plunge, and enjoy at least some of the great wild mushrooms that you'll see.
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(1) Chicken of the Woods (*Laetiporus sulphureus*)

There probably aren't any other fungi as distinctive as this mushroom. Bright yellow lumps and brackets growing on live or dead wood, there really isn't anything else like it. And if you find some, you might easily find five or ten kilos.

There are a few things to be aware of when picking this mushroom. Firstly, there's some evidence that if it's growing on either yew or eucalyptus, it might be poisonous. Secondly, you really only want it when it's young and juicy; it gets old and woody later, and it isn't good eating any more. Thirdly, there are some extremely rare examples of children hallucinating after eating this mushroom. So don't feed it to any tiny tots.

Other than that, munch away. It's remarkable just how much this mushroom really does taste like chicken, so I recommend making the most of that by adding it to chicken stews and curries. I like to keep some in the freezer, ready to be diced up and marinated in olive oil and herbs, making an ideal barbecue treat for vegetarians.

Found from Spring till Autumn.

Can be confused with: Cinnabar polypore (*Pycnoporus cinnabarinus*), which is bright orange rather than yellow.

Other Pictures at:

<http://www.bioimages.org.uk/HTML/T1785.HTM>

http://www.bluewillowpages.com/mushroomexpert/laetiporus_sulphureus.html

(2) Shaggy Cap (*Coprinus comatus*)

This

is a 'here today, gone tomorrow' mushroom, in that it's an ink cap, so its shelf life is very, very short. It's always going to try to turn black and inky, as that's how it releases its spores. But on the flip side, that very softness makes it a great treat.

Cook it in

soups and stews, and it more or less disappears. But the delicate flavour it imparts will more than compensate for its lack of mass.

This

mushroom looks rather like a shaggy white guards hat. You'll find it all over waste land, sports fields, pastures, parks, basically wherever the grass gets a bit of a beating and regular water, you have a fighting chance of finding it.

Expect to find it from Summer to Autumn, any time the weather has been wet.

Can be confused with: The common ink cap, *Coprinus atramentarius*, a dirty grey coloured ink cap, quite different to the common ink cap in that respect, and capable of making you quite ill if you have alcohol a day either side of eating it, and the magpie ink cap (*Coprinus picaeus*), which is only white when young, changing to greyish black quite quickly.

Pictures at:

<http://www.bioimages.org.uk/HTML/R151446.HTM>

http://botit.botany.wisc.edu/toms_fungi/may2004.html

(3) Giant Puffball (*Calvatia gigantea*)

Imagine

a roughly spherical fungus, anything between the size of a golf ball and three to four times the size of a football. Imagine that it's white, and that it has the texture of a firm marshmallow. And then imagine that you might find one big one, lots of small ones, or, if you're exceptionally lucky, a ring of a dozen or more large ones.

And that's the giant puffball. An unmistakable fungus.

When

you see it, first you should gently prod it. If it is firm-ish, you might be in for a feed. If it doesn't immediately feel soft and wet, pick it up and cut into it a little way. You're looking for it to be white all the way through, with no yellow or greenish bits, as that would mean that your puffball is over-ripe.

If you have a good

specimen then there are all manner of things you can do with it. Slice it, and fry it either side with bacon fat, maybe dipped in egg and breadcrumbs first. Hollow it out and stuff it with its own innards and meat, baking it in the oven. Dice it up and stew it. It couldn't be more versatile. If you're really brave and your specimen really young and firm, slice it thin and dry the slices. You'll have a kind of mushroom powder to add to gravy and soup or stew for years.

Can

be confused with: A football. Maybe a really big golf ball. A round

lump of polystyrene left in the woods by someone trying to confuse you.
Not a lot else.

Pictures at:

<http://www.bioimages.org.uk/HTML/T2276.HTM>

http://botit.botany.wisc.edu/toms_fungi/aug98.html

(4) Morel (*Morchella esculenta*, *M. vulgaris*, *M. rotunda*)

This

is one of the most prized mushrooms. It's like a brown brain on a stick, but rather than the lobes pointing outwards, they all poke inwards. It's found in Spring, in mixed and coniferous woodlands, especially if the soil is a bit sandy or has been burned, and occasionally on wood chippings. In my opinion, it's overrated, but some people go crazy over it.

Make sure you get all the sand and bugs out of the lobes, and be sure to cut it in two to make sure all the beasties are gone. Then you can cook it down with a little cream and some seasoning, and serve it on toast. There are many other ways to cook it, and being a somewhat 'gastronomic' fungus you'll find all manner of recipes in cook books.

Can be confused with: *Gymomitra esculenta*, which rather than being like a holy-brain is more lobe like. A quick look at pictures of this mushroom will be enough for you to distinguish it from true morels.

Pictures at:

<http://www.bioimages.org.uk/HTML/T30294.HTM>

http://home.wanadoo.nl/abiemans/e_morch_esc.html

(5) Oyster Mushroom (*Pleurotus ostreatus*, *P. cornucopiae*, *P. pulmonarius*)

The

oyster mushroom will be familiar to all of us, but what often surprises people is that this commonly farmed mushroom can be found in the wild, quite commonly, all year round, and it's almost guaranteed to be tastier when wild picked.

The variety of colours you'll find might be surprising at first. *P. cornucopiae* is almost always pale tan, almost white, with broad gaps between the gills. You'll find it on old tree stumps, most commonly oak, but I've picked it from sycamore and chestnut. It's softer than the genuine oyster mushroom, *P. ostreatus*, so it's a great frying mushroom.

P. ostreatus is the one you most often see in the shops. It can be brown, greyish, blackish, even greenish. You can find it on stumps and fallen wood all year; I've picked it on midwinter day and midsummer day the same year! It's firmness lends it to stews, and the firmness it can get when fried quickly makes it great stir-fried.

Can be confused with: Other bracket fungi growing on wood. Make sure that the oyster mushrooms have gills (not pores), that they're nice and big and in good clusters, and that the spore print is kind of lilac, and you'll be doing well to go wrong!

Pictures at:

http://botit.botany.wisc.edu/toms_fungi/oct98.html

<http://www.bioimages.org.uk/HTML/R155602.HTM>

(6) St. Georges Mushroom (*Calocybe gambosum*)

My absolute favourite mushroom. This superb mushroom appears in Spring, traditionally around the 23rd of April (St. Georges Day), and although most books will tell you that you're more likely to get it a week later, in the warm springs we've had in recent years I've been picking it from the middle of April onwards. Another common name for this species, also associated with the time of year you find it, is 'Maybun'.

You'll find it growing in rings on pastureland all over Britain, and it's the only large sized white mushroom like it in Spring (white cap, white stem, white gills, NO ring or volva). When young it's kind of mealy, when older it's strongly flavoured and aromatic, and some people find it a little overpowering. At that stage, though, it makes the best chicken and mushroom pie you will ever eat.

It also dries well, which makes a good harvest of this mushroom especially welcome when the dried stocks of autumn mushrooms are just beginning to get a bit sparse.

Can be confused with: If you make sure of the time of year and the description, there really isn't anything else that's a lot like it.

Pictures at:

<http://www.bioimages.org.uk/HTML/T728.HTM>

<http://www.mushroomhunter.com/stgeorge.htm>

(7) Field Blewit (*Lepista saeva*)

An utterly unmistakable mushroom, being brown on top with a purple stem, this mushroom makes choice eating between late Autumn and the middle of Winter (say, till February). It's common all over Britain, and to add to the purple stem there's a dirty pink spore print, making this mushroom utterly unmistakable.

Things to note about this mushroom include that it has a really strong flavour, and it gets very, very wet. Use that to your advantage, stew them down with meat and the water will come out and make a fabulous mushroomy stock. Cooked down with onions in a thick white sauce, and served in a ring of mashed potatoes you have a filling meal in itself.

There's also the wood blewit (*Lepista nuda*) which is a bit smaller, violet all over when young but browner when its older. It has a slightly more subtle, even more aromatic flavour. If you get enough, use them in a stew with pigeon, pheasant or rabbit with a few juniper berries. If you only have a few then cover them in batter and cook them as mushroom fritters. Make sure you cook blewits, as they make some people rather unsettled if eaten raw.

Can be

mistaken for: If you do a spore print and it's dirty pink, and you make sure what you pick looks like a field or wood blewit, nothing. There are some other mushrooms rather like a wood blewit but the spore print is fairly decisive. When you get your eye and your nose in these are really easy mushrooms to spot.

Pictures at:

http://home.wanadoo.nl/abiemans/e_lep_saev.html

[#### \(8 \) Orange Peel Fungus \(*Aleuria aurantia*\)](http://www.agarics.org/...jsp?recordName='Blue%20Leg%20(Field%20Blewit)'>http://www.agarics.org/...jsp?recordName='Blue%20Leg%20(Field%20Blewit)'</p></div><div data-bbox=)

Not

the tastiest, not the biggest, not even the most useful mushroom in the world. But probably the one that most looks like fruit peel. It's utterly unmistakable, if it it's a fungus that looks like orange peel, it's going to be orange peel fungus.

If you're walking along

in a park and see some orange rind on a patch of bare earth, have a closer look. It might indeed be orange peel, or it could be this distinctive, and rather tasty little fungus. It's normally found from around September till November, and when you do find it you might find several patches growing. It'll provide you with a pretty garnish for a mushroom omelette, giving some colour to the dish, or you can mix it in with other mushrooms to add a little bit of 'wild' flavour.

Can be confused with: Orange peel. Scarlet elf cap (*Sarcoscypha coccinea*), which is bright red rather than orange.

Pictures at:

<http://www.guernsey.net/~cdavid/botany/files/aleuria%20aurantia/>

http://www.mykoweb.com/CAF/species/Aleuria_aurantia.html

(9) Hedgehog Mushroom (*Hydnum repandum*)

Some

people go absolutely mad for this mushroom, and, in fairness, it's a tasty mushroom. It is really, really easy to identify. Rather than having gills or pores underneath, this white mushroom has spines. It has a spiky underside, on which it produces its spores.

Mixed

and pine woods are good for this mushroom, especially up in Scotland where it can be very plentiful, I'm told. Somewhat uncommon down in the South of England, so you're probably best leaving it be if you find it down here.

It's best cooked, and cook it well, otherwise it can be a little bitter.

Can be confused with: Other *Hydnum* species, which aren't dangerous.

Pictures at:

http://www.first-nature.com/.../cantharellales/hydnum_repandum.htm

<http://www.bioimages.org.uk/HTML/R151363.HTM>

(10) Jews Ear Fungus (*Auricularia auricula-judae*)

How

exactly this mushroom got its rather un-PC name isn't clear; what is clear, though, is that in appearance and texture it is indeed very, very like an ear. Spookily so. So much so that handing one to someone without warning them is unfair, and it's the kind of trick you should never play on anyone. Especially not your partners mum. As I once discovered.

Get over the unpleasantness and this is a really tasty mushroom. Slice it thin and add it to stir fries and noodle soups, use it just like you might use a Chinese wood ear mushroom, and you can't go far wrong. If you find you really like the texture then add it to omelettes and other dishes. It's a bit like sea-weed in texture, you'll either love it or you'll hate it.

Most often you'll find it on gnarled old elder trees, but don't be surprised to see it also on other dead wood.

Can be confused with: Other jelly fungi, but when you've got an eye and a 'feel' for this mushroom it's very easy to identify.

Pictures at:

http://botit.botany.wisc.edu/toms_fungi/apr2004.html

http://www.first-nature.com/fungi/...../auricularia_auricula-judae.htm