



## Nature Thing of the Month



### Amazing Mushrooms

April showers bring more than flowers! The warm and moist days of spring bring about the sudden appearance of mushrooms in woodlands and backyards across Ohio

### A Fungus Among Us

Simply put, a mushroom is the fruit of a fungus • A fungus is type of plant, called a *saprophyte*, which cannot make its own food, but gets nutrients from dead and decaying green plants • Most of the shy fungus stays below the soil year-round • Each spring, though, new mushrooms pop up above the ground, filled with tiny *spores* that blow in the wind and spread the fungus to new locations



Most mushrooms have three parts: the **stem** (called the *stipe*); the **cap** (called the *pileus*); and the **gills** (called *lamellae*) on the underside of the cap, which hold the spores

### Fun with Fungus

Mushrooms have an important job to do in the environment • Since they feed on dead organisms, they help break down fallen logs, leaves, stems, and other organic debris • Mushrooms recycle the nutrients from the dead plants for use by the living plants around or attached to them • Mushrooms also provide nutritious meals for lots of forest critters, like wild turkeys, deer and box turtles

Many types of fungus cling to tree roots below the soil, and their mushrooms poke through the ground soil around the tree trunk • Some species are quite specific about their food source and will be found only under or near certain kinds of trees, such as pines or oaks • By establishing a relationship with living tree roots, woodland mushrooms are essential to good growth, and even survival of trees

Sometimes, meadow-dwelling mushrooms push up through the grass in a perfect circle, known as a fairy ring • Even when the mushrooms are not visible above ground, a mysterious ring of lush dark green grass is a clue that the fungus is busy below the soil

## **Native Shrooms**

Ohio is home to many species of mushrooms that come in a variety of shapes, colors, sizes and textures • Many look familiar, like a pale colored umbrella on top of a stem, with a smooth surface and springy texture • Some mushrooms are brightly colored, some are bumpy, and others look like they are made up of many thin layers and shaped like clam shells • Some mushrooms look like frilly yellow flowers, and others look like giant white puffballs

At least half of wild mushrooms species are poisonous to people, and some can be deadly if eaten, so NEVER touch or try a bite of a wild mushroom unless you are sure it is safe • Colorful mushrooms are often very toxic, and several edible mushrooms have look-alikes that are not good to eat • Edible wild mushrooms should always be cooked before eating • (Mushrooms for sale at the grocery store are usually farm raised for eating, not collected from the wild)

## **Morel Mushrooms**

The morel is the most popular edible mushroom to hunt for in the spring • Because of their dull brown color, they are masters at blending into their environment on the forest floor • Morels prefer to grow in moist soil and can be found beside live trees or fallen trees, near decaying logs, beneath layers of leaf litter or tucked among a batch of leafy ferns

Morels have strange cone-shaped bodies, full of pits and holes, like a sponge • Unlike most other mushrooms, morels are hollow • A similar-looking, but poisonous mushroom, the "false morel," is bulkier and not hollow • Mushroom hunters must be sure they have found a "true" morel before taking a bite

If you would like to try a taste of a true morel mushroom, check out the Mushroom Madness program at Malabar Farm on April 25 or the Morel Mushroom Hike at Caesar Creek on May 3 • Mushroom experts will show you where to find mushrooms, and which ones are safe to eat

## **Mushroom Myths and Legends**

Amazing mushrooms and their mysterious habits have inspired some fantastic folklore • In Medieval Europe, people believed that mushroom fairy rings marked the place where fairies gathered to dance, and served as the gateway to the elfin kingdom • In France, the rings were said to be guarded by giant bug-eyed toads who cursed anyone who stepped inside them • In Scottish tradition, the mushrooms of a fairy ring served as tables for the fairies, while the Welsh believed the fairies used the mushrooms for parasols on rainy days • Children in ancient Tyrol were told that the fairy rings were created by the fiery tails of dragons flying overhead, and nothing but toadstools could grow along the rings for seven years • William Shakespeare mentions fairy rings in a few of his famous plays, including "A Midsummer Night's Dream"

## **Mushroom Mania**

While mushrooms seem to pop up suddenly after a rain, and disappear nearly as quickly, the part underground may be dozens or even hundreds of years old

It's not scientific, but traditionally, the term "toadstool" refers to poisonous varieties, while "mushroom" is the word for the types that are tasty and safe to eat

For centuries, edible mushrooms have been an important part of folk medicine, especially in Asia • Certain mushrooms have been used to fight against viruses, help stop the spread of cancer, and boost the human immune system

The next time you take a hike through a meadow or into the woods this spring, keep an eye out for nature's amazing mushrooms and enchanting fairy rings • See how many different types you can find, and remember...look but don't touch!

Photos from left to right: **Aricularise**, also know as "jelly ear" on a tree branch (DO NOT eat) • **Pluteus Mushroom**, also know as deer or fawn mushrooms • **Scutellinia**, also know as "eyelash cup" (DO NOT eat) • **Urnula**, also know as "devil's urn" (DO NOT eat) (photo courtesy of [ontariowildflowers.com](http://ontariowildflowers.com))

