

MUSHROOM NEWSLETTER

13 January 2009

Obviously this is a very quiet time of year when it comes to mushrooms. Yes, there are a few velvet shanks, blewits and Jew's ear to be found, but it's hard work. Instead I would normally be consuming my stocks of dried porcini, but the past two seasons have been so dreadful that my store cupboard is almost bare.



Spectacular, but mushroom-poor (photo taken down the Wye Valley from my front lawn on 12 December)

My gloom was lifted this morning by a subscriber (Marck Pearlstone) alerting me to a fungi story (<http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/sci/tech/7823970.stm>). This contained a few fungal facts which in turn prompted me to collate a list of fungal 'did you know's?'

GENERAL

- Mushrooms lack the chlorophyll that allows plants to manufacture their own food. As a result they are a distinct kingdom from animals and plants.
- Around 15,000 fungal species have been found in the UK.
- The world's largest living organism (by area) is a honey fungus in Oregon which covers 8.9 km² (2,200 acres).
- We don't know whether mycelia fruit because they are healthy or stressed.
- Britain now has fewer than 10 professional taxonomic mycologists.



Britain is desperately short of trained mycologists

FUNGAL FEASTS



Cooking mushrooms is almost as much fun as the thrill of the chase

- Even non-mushroom eaters rely on dietary fungi (eg bread, beer and wine).
- The most expensive mushroom ever was a 1,200g (2lb 10oz) Alba truffle sold to a Hong Kong consortium in 2005 for £62,000.
- In the 1920s Britain's last professional truffle hunter would collect up to 10kg a day.
- In 2006 a Wiltshire farmer found 75kg of truffles in a wood he planted as recently as 1990.



White truffles (above) are much more expensive than the commoner summer truffle

TREES AND FUNGI

- Most trees rely on fungi to extract and release nutrients. Some are free-living in the soil, but others live around the roots, passing nutrition to the tree in return for the sugars it has manufactured from water and carbon dioxide.



Many mushrooms have complex symbiotic relationships with trees

- Some specialized fungi draw in nutrients from afar, luring in soil-inhabiting animals, only to glue them down, kill and eat them. Oyster mushrooms, for example, lure nematode worms to their deaths.



- Timber is comprised principally of cellulose and lignin. Few creatures can digest these dense long-chain carbohydrates, so stag- and longhorn beetles rely on fungi to begin the decay process before tucking in.
- Woodworm larvae are almost unique in eating undecayed wood by harnessing microscopic yeasts that live in special parts of their gut.
- Many fungi have complex relationships with trees. Some – such as honey fungus – are very harmful, but many have a neutral or even beneficial effect. Chicken of the woods feeds on dead heartwood, transforming a heavy solid trunk into a light but strong cylinder that better resists gales.
- Likewise beefsteak fungus feeds on dead wood, but also stains the surrounding timber dark red. This is highly-prized by cabinet makers (many pieces of furniture at Versailles boast beefsteak-derived veneers).

LICHEN



Three lichen species photographed on the south facing bark of one Welsh oak (13 January 2009)

- Lichens are a grey area, however, These are fungi that live in association with algae, some of which contain nitrogen-fixing blue-green algae (cyanobacteria) which allows them to extract chemicals from the air.
- As well as conventional photosynthesis, many can also 'fix' air-borne nitrogen in soluble compounds which then find their way into the tree.
- A veteran oak may host over a 100 lichen species. These attract micro-organisms and insects which draw in birds, bats and rodents, feeding the tree through their droppings, urine and corpses.

Sorry, that's enough of the fascinating facts. On a final note, my new foray package based in the Clyn seems to have hit the mark. One group of four has booked in, fixing the dates for the nights of 3 and 4 October with mushroom hunting on Monday 4th and Tuesday 5th. I am really excited about this and think it may be the way forward in future years, but I can probably only do one break there this year. This means there is only room for one more group of 4 – 7 people on the same break. The all-inclusive deal will cost £250 per person.

Meanwhile, good hunting and roll on April and the St Georges!

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P.S. I loathe junk e-mails and would be horrified to think I might be clogging up your systems unnecessarily, so if at any time you want your name taken off, just let me know with a brief - preferably polite - indication that you want to be removed.