

MUSHROOM NEWSLETTER

April 19 2009

I say it every year, but I just can't help myself – spring is here! And naturally, as a mushroom lover in an acid soil region, this can only mean St George's. As most of you will know, these get their name because, traditionally, they emerge on 23 April (interestingly, in Italy they are known as *marzolini* – 'March's little ones' – presumably because they come up a little earlier in the warmer climate).

Actually, in both cases – and despite global warming – the theoretical dates tend to be slightly premature. Certainly in the Cambrians we would normally expect them in the first week of May, but that said, one year in five they are on time.



St George's grow in rings in unimproved pasture – look for a 'conventional' mushroom with white gills and a mealy smell

As a result, I generally don't head up the hill to look for them before my daughter, Molly's, birthday (28 April), but this year my interest was sparked by a Southampton newsletter reader, Andy Murdock, who spotted the first in the grounds of the University on 8 April. I was skiing at the time, but as soon as I returned, I hared up the hill to check on my own patches . . . nothing!

Three days ago another subscriber, John Gent, spotted rings on the Isle of Wight, while another friend reports seeing a ring growing on a roundabout in Swansea. Obviously I needed no further encouragement to inspect my local patches and, sure enough, the very first buttons were beginning to poke their heads above the soil.



Molly found the first of the season on 18 April, but they were tiny and she needed to know where to look . . .

The other important spring species, of course, is the morel. These ought to be up now, growing on alkaline soil and often associated with waste ground and scorched earth (eg in the ashes of bon- and forest fires). Sadly, I have never found one locally and *Plantlife's* Ray Woods, a far better mycologist than myself, agrees they are absent from Mid-Wales because the soil is too acidic.

Certainly my only find was in Norfolk (actually calling it a 'find' is taking a bit of a liberty with the verité – I was told where to look by a friend). She has yet to report the start of this year's harvest, but it is undoubtedly due any day, so for those of you who live on chalky soils, now is the time to get out there . . .



Morels are unappealing in appearance and difficult to spot, but they more than make up for this with their superb flavour

Evidence that spring is here also comes in the wildlife form. As I type a huge bumble bee is banging against the window, while I have just spotted my first swallows and redstarts of the year flitting around our pond. The first cuckoo started to call ten minutes ago and to cap everything, last night I heard the familiar wheezing snores from the outbuildings which tell me that our barn owls have hatched yet another brood of youngsters (in 200 they fledged a brood of seven which is, I believe, a Welsh record).



Barn owls and redstarts – two of my favourite neighbours

Finally, I would urge all readers to have a quick check of the website. I've just added a new recipe page (updated monthly). The first entry is for morel fondue – a dish I discovered last year when skiing in France and which I was fortunate enough to eat once more when in the Alps last week.

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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.