

MUSHROOM NEWSLETTER

What makes a good season?

18 September 2014

As my last couple of newsletters have indicated, this year is shaping up to be one of the best seasons in a generation. There were bumper crops of early ceps in late August and although things have now died down a little, I have the hunch it's the calm before the storm. The reason for this optimism? Well it's down to a combination of 20 years' experience and the recent dry weather.



Saffron milk caps and ceps are already up in force

What makes for a great mushroom season? The answer is that in most cases we don't really know. Certainly we have worked out how to cultivate a dozen species including oyster, shitake, paddy and the familiar buttons, but most wild mushrooms most have such complicated symbiotic relationships with plants and habitats that we can't replicate conditions in sufficient detail to get them to grow to order.



It's a record-breaking year – but why?

Most people think it is linked mainly to temperature and rainfall. Indeed, until fairly recently I agreed, noting that most of my best porcini patches are on mossy banks at the bottom edge of conifer plantations. Until recently, I reckoned this was because rain would land on the hilltop, trickling down through the slowly rotting forest floor mulch, gradually turning into a sort of 'nutrient soup' as it went.

Now there is definitely something in this. After all, one virtually never finds mushrooms on the lower edge of a forestry road. This is probably linked to the drainage ditches which interrupt the flow and mean conditions are much more arid immediately below the track. But this theory is tarnished – I have found good patches above woodland and some of my biggest hauls have been in the hot, arid, conditions of late August.



Porcini grow fast and furious when the trees have had a good year . . .

As a result, I now think bumper crops are much more closely linked to growing conditions for the host trees. Even in a really dry year their tap roots stretch down far enough to reach well below the dwindling water table and the long hours of sunshine make for a brilliant growing season. In consequence the mushrooms are insulated from the lack of water by their symbiotic ectomycorrhizal relationship with the trees (try saying that after a bottle of wine). This mouthful of a scientific phrase, by the way, means the cepe (or porcino) sheaths the host's roots with its own root-like structures (mycelium), while sending out thread-like hyphae both into the surrounding soil to collect nutrients and into the tree to exchange these for sugars and water.

This theory about the importance of the tree determining the mushroom crop is also borne out by the fact that the mushrooms generally grow along paths and rides, rather

than deep in the gloom beneath the trees. This, in theory, is where they ought to be found because there is no competition for nutrients from faster-growing plants. Unlike these greedy competitors, mushrooms don't photosynthesise, so have no need for light – thus one would expect them to thrive in this sunless world. Well, obviously countless micro-species such as yeasts do, but not the bigger, edible, specimens.



Woodland rides are usually the best places to find fungi

But back to the current season: things have died down slightly after the mayhem of late August and early September, but there are good grounds for optimism. In almost all years the height of the season (at least in terms of the range of species) is at the beginning of October. Obviously it varies, but over the years some of my best finds have been on the first weekend of that month (my record was 31 edible species in on one 5 October – although I forget which year).



Bay boletes, honey fungus and fly agaric are starting to fruit – encouraging signs

Also, as any keen porcini hunter will know, their arrival is normally presaged by the appearance of a range of 'indicator' species. These include russulas, slippery jacks, bay boletes, saffron milk caps, honey fungus and fly agaric. All of the above are starting to fruit in significant numbers – and it's already a bumper year for amethyst deceivers.



Amethyst deceivers are both striking and tasty

Let's hope everything lives up to expectations!

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P.S. As always, let me know if you want to be removed from the list and I will do it forthwith.