

MUSHROOM NEWSLETTER

22 January 2018

WINTER GOODIES



Jew's ear fruits throughout the year, even in the depths of winter

Everyone knows autumn is the time to find mushrooms, so it surprises many to discover there are edibles available throughout the year – even in the depths of winter.

Jew's ear is perhaps the most easily-found winter mushroom. It is also one of the easiest fungi to recognize – even for a beginner. This purple/brown mushroom lives up to its name by resembling a human ear and virtually always grows on elder. The first part of its name comes from the suggestion that Judas committed suicide by hanging himself on an elder. This is of course rubbish. This damp-loving tree weed is hardly ubiquitous in one of the driest places on earth and it could almost certainly not support the weight of a hanging man. The myths are probably rooted in pagan links with witchcraft (even today many people believe it is unlucky to burn it on a hearth). Once the monks arrived, the authorities tried to hijack popular parts of the pre-Christian popular culture by linking it to the epitome of New Testament evil.

Very recently there has been a guilt-ridden post Holocaust attempt to Bowdlerise the name by changing it to 'wood' or 'jelly' ear. The first is actually the name of a closely-related cultivated mushroom much used in Chinese cooking (so misleading and wrong), while the second seems rather prissy. This is all the more so because apparently its name in Hebrew is 'Joshua's ear' – thus it seems difficult to suggest linking the mushroom to Judaism is deeply offensive to Semites.



It's obvious how a related mushroom, the scarlet elf cup, gets its common name. This also likes to fruit during the colder months. Until recently I regarded it as interesting, but inedible. I now discover you can eat it although I can't report it to be delicious. I think it's most valued because firstly it's available when not much else is around and secondly for its colour. Enthusiasts suggest tasty fillings – such as herb-rich cream cheese – or as a garnish for something which is genuinely top-notch.



Striking, but of limited gastronomic interest . . .

These aren't the only edible fungi to be found in the coldest, darkest, months of the year. Oyster mushrooms are one of the rare wild species which can be cultivated. Their growth is triggered by changing temperatures from mild warmth to cold and back again.



A good crop of oysters on a fallen New Forest oak . . .

These aren't the only goodies to be found. Velvet shanks will grow through snow and frost. They are fond of elm as a host, but can be found on other broadleaf species.



Velvet shanks on young elm suckers (photographed on Boxing Day) . . .

While at this point the cupboard begins to run bare (although there could still be a few blewits and winter chanterelles if you're lucky), it's worth mentioning a couple of medicinal mushrooms. Turkey tail and birch polypore both have anti-viral qualities when infused to make a tea.



Turkey tail is a common bracket fungi with proven medical benefits . . .

On other notes, I've conducted my first hawk walk, with a surprisingly well-behaved Sky flying for an audience. The format, should anyone be interested, is a two- to three-hour walk through stunning countryside while talking about man's changing relationship with raptors and culminating with a goshawk doing what a goshawk does best – putting on the avian equivalent of a jet fighter.



There's something about a goshawk in the snow . . .

And, of course, it's the time of year when people traditionally think about their holidays. If anyone wants to visit Pembrokeshire, Glebe House sleeps up to 10, is dog-friendly and from April to July it boasts the fantastic natural spectacles of puffins at nearby Skomer or dolphins (and mackerel) off New Quay. If interested, the website is www.glebeholidays.co.uk and the availability calendar is always up to date.



Pembrokeshire is an outdoor place . . .

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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.