

Mushrooms – One of Spring’s Delicacies

Written by: **Dan Whetzel**

Mushroom hunting is fun because it combines the thrill of the hunt with the exercise of walking in the woods. The foraging also rewards hunters at the end of the day because mushrooms provide for a tasty and nutritious meal. No matter what variety of mushroom is preferred, hunters enjoy looking for that illusive patch just over the hill.



Morel mushrooms

Wild mushrooms are the fruit of a fungus whose primary biological purpose is to produce and disperse spores that will grow into a new fungus. They are separated into different classifications by mycologists (scientists who study fungus), but only two types are generally important to mushroom hunters and connoisseurs, those mushrooms that are edible and those that are not. And learning to identify mushrooms is the first important step to enjoying the fungus as a food and hobby.

Four species of mushrooms are relatively easy to identify: the chicken mushroom, the great puffball, morels, and the chanterelle. These edible ones are high in protein and fiber while also providing a variety of vitamins. However, other species that sometimes resemble the desirable ones are poisonous, and caution is necessary when gathering wild mushrooms. Consulting reliable resources before hunting wild mushrooms is recommended, and The Audubon Society and North American Mycological Association offer expert advice for both beginners and advanced “shroomers.” Local clubs also exist in many regions. While guide books and organizations assist novices and hunters, most Western Maryland hunters first learn about hunting wild mushrooms through family members, a tradition that shows no signs of abating.

Zane and Tim Mackie have hunted mushrooms in Western Maryland and Pennsylvania for more than 25 years, after being introduced to the hobby by Zane’s wife, Patti and her brothers and father. “We hunt them as a hobby and probably most people feel the same way, although others realize commercial value in them. As long as the weather cooperates

from April through spring, we hunt morels. The black ones appear first, later yellow and white ones.”

While not scarce or endangered, the wild mushroom can be illusive and mysterious because not every wooded area will have a patch waiting to be collected. Another factor is the time it takes for mushrooms to sprout from a seed, about five years. To complicate matters, hunters find that an area that has been fruitful in the past will, for unknown reasons, not yield mushrooms in succeeding years. “You have to know the right locations. I look around poplar trees and apple orchards. When you find a good spot, you remember it. And if I find one, I always look around because there are probably more nearby. According to Zane, such locations become a private matter that hunters only reveal to family members and close friends.

Zane’s most vivid hunting memories involve the locations that produced abundant numbers of mushrooms. “Three times I found places that looked like a fairyland. There were more than a hundred, and that is what keeps you coming back.”

The Mackie’s also learned a cautionary tale about what may happen if one eats the wrong species of mushroom. “One local hunter ate a ‘Jack O’ Lantern’ that grows on

stumps, and he ended up in the emergency room suffering from violent stomach regurgitation. People can definitely get into trouble by not knowing what they're picking and eating," stated Tim.

While morels are the Mackie's favorite, they also gather Sheep's Head, which grow to enormous sizes, and Meadow Mushrooms. "Turn the Meadow mushroom over; if it's white underneath, it's not to be collected. If it's brown or pink, we pick it," commented Zane.



Tim and Zane Mackie, veteran mushroom hunters.

Knowing when to pick a mushroom is also a consideration for hunters. Generally, if a mushroom is starting to discolor, it is on the "downside" and is saying "pick me." Slight discoloration does not make for a bad mushroom; just trim the undesirable spots when preparing it for eating. Some hunters use a 50% rule, meaning if half is good, then it is worth picking. Simply pinching and twisting the stem near the ground will do for the harvesting process. Placing the harvested crop in a cloth or paper bag is recommended because it allows for air circulation. The use of plastic is not recommended as it causes the mushroom to be soggy and warm.

Short Gap resident, Chris Zollner, also loves to look for mushrooms, a hobby he has enjoyed for the past 15 years. "I hunt on my own property and on Iron's Mountain." Chris's favorite mushroom is the morel, so he hunts in the springtime but with only limited success. "I'm not real good at finding them. You can learn to hunt mushrooms, but I believe you need to have the 'knack.' And you either have the knack or you don't. My cousin was real good at finding them. I went over a section of ground with him for an hour and didn't find anything. My cousin then walked through the same area that I had looked and found a third of a bag."

Although a knowledgeable forester for the state of Maryland, Dan Hedderick experienced hunting morels for the first time in the spring of 2006. Dan was accompanied by his wife, Angela, and children, Alex and Katy. "We thought that we would go out and try it. Alex found them the fastest. He is only four years old and closer to ground. We had three short visits and came up with about 75 mushrooms. But it was on the last day that Alex stopped and said 'mushrooms,' that we found the most. There were mushrooms in a field of full sunlight, next to a skid path, and the area had already been logged. Everyone said you won't find them where wood is being harvested, but we did. We left some of the mushrooms so they could release spores for reproduction."

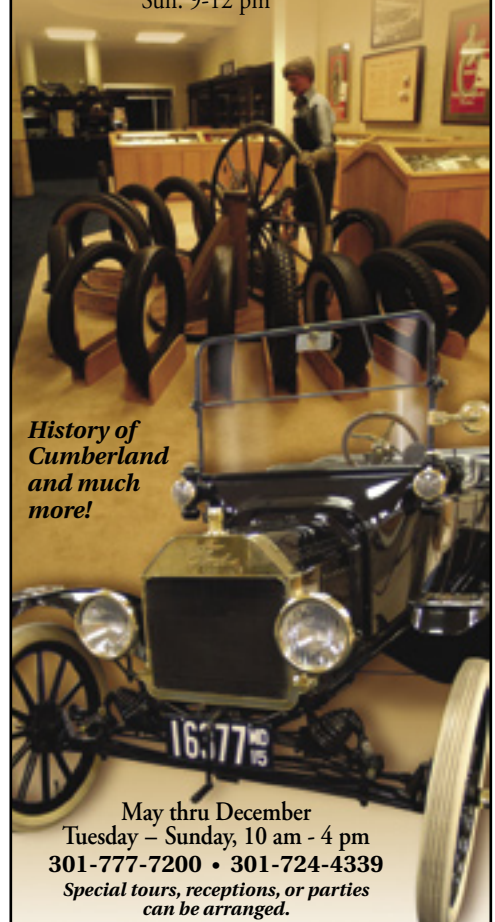
No matter how experienced, all "shroomers" have one common goal: to find that giant patch that always seems to be hiding over the next hill. 🍄

Allegany County Museum

81 Baltimore St., Downtown Cumberland

2007 Calendar of Events

- May 5** **Antique Discovery Show**
Weschler's of Washington, DC.
Identification and appraisal of antiques, collectibles, etc.
Sat. 10 am - 12 noon ?
- June 9-10** **Heritage Days Open House**
Special tours and exhibits.
Sat. & Sun. 10 am - 4 pm
- June-Sept.** **"Friday After Five"**
Friday evenings 5-9 pm
- July 7-8** **Canal Fest/Rail Fest**
Museum Antique Car/Truck Show
Model canal boats, model trains, etc.
- Sept. 22** **7th Annual Ford Model T & Model A Car/Truck Show**
Exhibits & tours. Sat. 10 am - 4 pm
- Nov. 18- Dec. 9** **Festival of Trees** 1 - 4 pm
- Nov. 23** **Holiday Open House**
Special decorations, quartet, carols.
Fri. 5-9 pm
- Dec. 6, 13, 20** **Santa Claus Visitation**
Mr. & Mrs. Claus, carriage rides, photos, treats, etc. Free 5-9 pm
- Dec. 31** **New Year's Eve Open House**
Music, exhibits, refreshments.
Sun. 9-12 pm



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