

FUNGI

From the elusive truffle to fabled fairy rings, autumn heralds the start of the mushroom growing season

WORDS JACKY HOBBS | PHOTOGRAPHS MICHELLE GARRETT



A delicate lilac in colour, ***Laccaria amethystina*** 'Amethyst Deceiver' is one of the edible varieties you might come across when foraging during the autumn.

As autumn draws on, mushrooms of all shapes and sizes rise up, encouraged by the damp weather and long, dark nights. Various specimens cling to trees, while field mushrooms and puffballs form distinctive fairy rings in grassland, and others shelter among leaf litter or, in the case of the elusive truffle, hide deep underground. There are more than 14,000 species of fungi, a large number of which are poisonous, so careful identification is vital. That said, the pleasure of finding edible mushrooms and cooking them for yourself cannot be overstated.

WHAT MAKES A MUSHROOM?

Be it an umbrella-shaped specimen, a puffball or a flat disc, a mushroom is made up of the following parts: a cap with gills underneath, a stem, and thread-like roots called

mycelium. Some specimens have a ring of tissue midway up the stem, and a volva – a cup that encircles the stem base.

HOW DO THEY GROW?

Found across the country, in a wide range of habitats, many fungi have symbiotic relationships with particular species of tree. Chanterelles, for example, grow with birch, pine, oaks and beech. Other fungi, such as 'Chicken of the Woods', assist in the process of decay on dead trees and can be found on rotting trunks. Dry summers and a spell of cold weather help the mycelial threads mature, before autumn rains accelerate growth, which occurs so fast – in a matter of days, and mostly after dusk – that it is almost visible. Edible mushrooms are best picked early in the morning when they are most fresh. ▶



1. *Lactarius* sp. [prob]. 'Milk Cap', not edible, woodland. 2 and 14. *Mycena galericulata*, 'Common Bonnet', not edible, woodland.
3. *Laccaria proxima*, 'Deceiver', edible, woodland and grassy areas. 4. xxxxxxxxxx, common name?, edible? habitat?
5. *Collybia butyracea*, 'Butter Cap', edible but unpleasant, habitat?. 6. *Russula* sp. [maybe coprinus sp??], 'Brittle Gill', not edible, woodland. 7, 9 and 10. *Laccaria amethystina*, 'Amethyst Deceiver', edible, woodland. 8 and 12 [prob]. *Gymnopilus penetrans*, 'Common Rustgill', not edible, conifer stumps. 11. *Piptoporus betulinus*, 'Birch Polypore', not edible, on dead or dying trees.
13. *Mycena alcalina*, not edible, woodland. 15. *Amanita* sp. 'Amanites mushroom', not edible, habitat?.



9



10



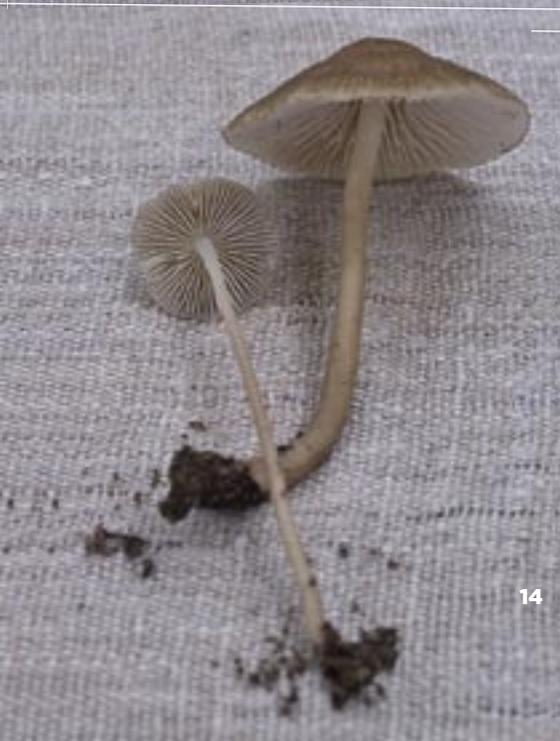
11



12



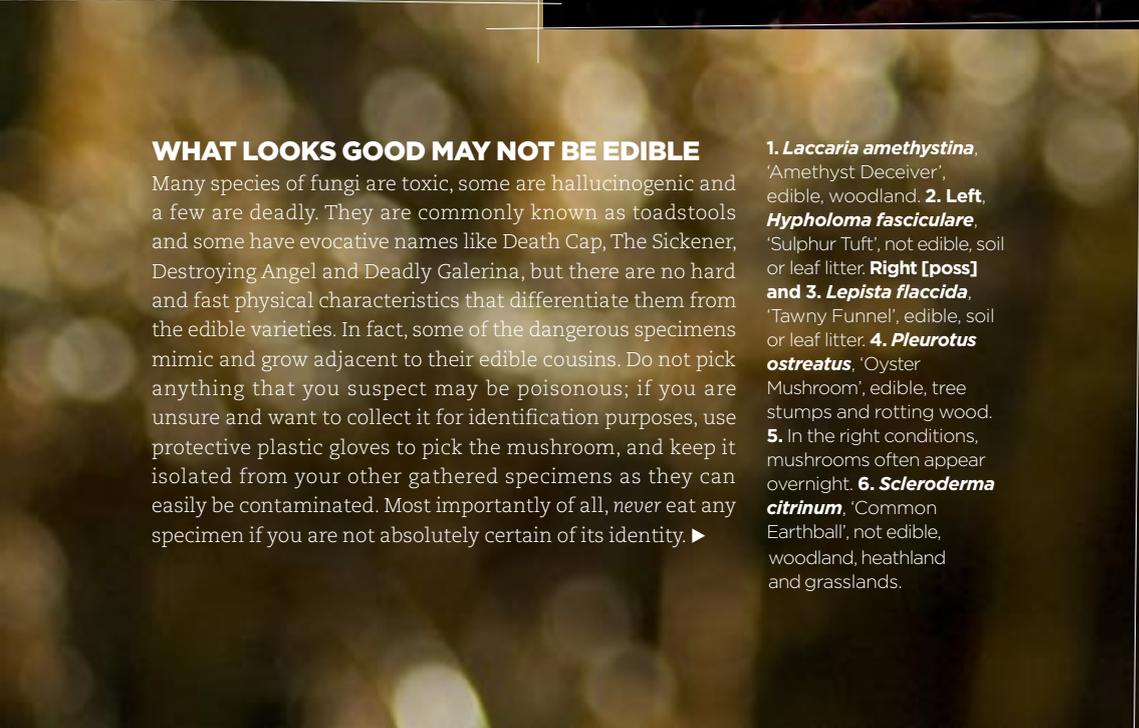
13



14



15



WHAT LOOKS GOOD MAY NOT BE EDIBLE

Many species of fungi are toxic, some are hallucinogenic and a few are deadly. They are commonly known as toadstools and some have evocative names like Death Cap, The Sickener, Destroying Angel and Deadly Galerina, but there are no hard and fast physical characteristics that differentiate them from the edible varieties. In fact, some of the dangerous specimens mimic and grow adjacent to their edible cousins. Do not pick anything that you suspect may be poisonous; if you are unsure and want to collect it for identification purposes, use protective plastic gloves to pick the mushroom, and keep it isolated from your other gathered specimens as they can easily be contaminated. Most importantly of all, *never* eat any specimen if you are not absolutely certain of its identity. ▶

- 1. *Laccaria amethystina***, 'Amethyst Deceiver', edible, woodland. **2. Left, *Hypholoma fasciculare***, 'Sulphur Tuft', not edible, soil or leaf litter. **Right [poss] and 3. *Lepista flaccida***, 'Tawny Funnel', edible, soil or leaf litter. **4. *Pleurotus ostreatus***, 'Oyster Mushroom', edible, tree stumps and rotting wood. **5.** In the right conditions, mushrooms often appear overnight. **6. *Scleroderma citrinum***, 'Common Earthball', not edible, woodland, heathland and grasslands.

6

Mycena inclinata,
'Clustered Bonnet',
not edible, habitat?.



FORAGING FOR FUNGI

- Use a guide book to help you with identification.
- A stout stick is useful for pushing aside undergrowth, and a sharp knife is essential for cutting specimens.
- Plastic gloves are useful, particularly when dealing with specimens that you suspect may be toxic.
- A small brush will enable you to clean specimens as you go.
- Specimens can be carried in a basket, while paper bags can be used to divide samples.
- Fungi grow at ground level, but also on rotting wood and living tree trunks, so it's a good idea to scan all surfaces.
- After picking a crop of mushrooms, you may find more specimens emerge in the same place just a few days later.
- It's important not to disturb the natural environment.

ORGANISED OUTINGS

Novices and enthusiasts alike would do well to join an organised foray. Led by experts and available across the country – particularly in the autumn months – these outings will help you learn where to go and when, and what to look for. Search the internet for local excursions or mushroom hunting holidays, or go to forestry.gov.uk and type “fungal foray” into the search function. ■



homesandgardens.com/plants
for more gardening inspiration

With thanks to Sheila Spence of Porcini, 01531 631736, and the Royal Botanic Gardens, Kew, for help in identification.