

Respectful Mushroom Harvesting

by Dave Pilz

Mushrooms are one of the most fascinating and rewarding products that can be harvested from our forests. By harvesting with respect, we can ensure their continued abundance and make the experience of mushroom hunting enjoyable for everyone. These guidelines will help you and others continue to enjoy our fabulous fungi and the forests where they grow.

About Forest Fungi

- The body of forest fungi consists of a web of one-cell wide fungal threads that grow in the soil or rotting wood.
- This web, called a “mycelium”, shares nutrients with trees through their roots tips or absorbs nutrients from decomposing organic matter.
- Mushrooms, truffles, and conks are the reproductive structures (fruiting bodies) of this web of fungal filaments, much like an apple on an apple tree.
- Fungal fruiting bodies produce spores that are moved around by wind, water, animals, birds, insects and possibly even on the shoes of mushroom hunters.
- Removing a mushroom from the forest might reduce its spore dispersal, but careful picking probably does not directly harm the “body” of the fungus (the mycelium).
- All forest fungi play vital roles in the functioning of forest ecosystems, providing food and nutrient recycling for almost all the creatures that live in our forests, especially the trees!

Harvest Methods

- Be certain of your mushroom identification. Harvest only the mushrooms you will use. Leave some to feed wildlife and release spores. Remember that they will likely spoil if you are unable to keep them cool and clean, and then cook or preserve them within 24 hours.
- Leave little, immature mushrooms to grow larger. They aren't worth bending your back or knees to pick and they have not yet released any spores.
- Leave large, old mushrooms that are beginning to spoil because they are probably still releasing spores. Rotting mushrooms, like any such fruit, can make you ill.
- Pluck mushrooms carefully by rocking and twisting them, or cut them off near their base. Do not dig them out or you will harm the mycelium. Cover the hole where they grew so your activities are not unsightly and the mycelium is protected.
- If you trim bad parts off the mushrooms you harvest, spread the pieces around discretely. You might help spread spores and will leave the area looking less disturbed.
- Do not collect mushrooms in plastic bags as they will become slimy and might be wasted. Mesh bags, wicker baskets, or buckets with holes in the bottom allow rainwater to drain and might spread some spores from your collected mushrooms as you walk around.

Caring for the Forest

- Obtain permission to harvest mushrooms from the landowner.
- Remove only mushrooms you will use, photos, and trash. Leave only footprints.
- Be courteous to wildlife and other forest visitors. We all share our environment.
- Volunteer to help others learn how to harvest mushrooms respectfully. Enjoy!