

Go easy on those mysterious mushrooms

by Jim Hole

Just about anyone who owns a lawn is familiar with the fairy rings that crop up periodically. But shortly after warm summer rains, it's not unusual to find patches of other strange-looking mushrooms popping up all over the lawn.

The most common reaction to a cluster of mushrooms is often one of disgust, quickly followed by a desire to spray something to eradicate them. But eradication is often neither desirable nor necessary. In fact, mushrooms are often indicative of not a disease problem, but a rich, well-functioning soil ecosystem.

Every mushroom (or, more properly, fungi) can be categorized into one of three broad areas:

- Those that attack living plants such as powdery mildew, are referred to as pathogens;
- Those that feed on dead plants and animals, including the mushrooms that end up on pizzas, are saprophytes;
- Fungi that actually help plants grow, such as mycorrhizal fungi that help plant roots absorb moisture, are symbiotic.

Mushrooms that pop up in the lawn are typically saprophytic, living off old decaying wood or other dead plant tissue. Occasionally, mushrooms from mycorrhizal fungi will grow large enough to emerge from the soil, particularly in places where trees were recently removed and replaced with grass.

Strangely enough, researchers believe that if you go far enough back on the evolutionary chain, mushrooms are more closely related to people than they are to plants. But mushrooms act differently than we do, particularly when it comes to mealtimes. People eat food and then digest it, while mushrooms, with the help of special enzymes, digest food prior to ingestion.

Do Not Eat

Speaking of eating habits, some gardeners have asked me if they should eat the mushrooms they find growing on their lawn. The short answer is no.

Unless you can positively identify which mushrooms are edible, which isn't all that easy, you're taking your life into your own hands. As the saying goes, there are bold mushroom pickers and old mushroom pickers, but are there no old, bold mushroom pickers.

Stop and Smell and Fungi

By and large, mushrooms cause very little, if any, damage to the lawn.

Poorly-drained lawns are more likely to have mushrooms emerge, but even soils with excellent drainage will have mushrooms spring up from time to time, particularly following heavy rains. Applications of fungicides are not particularly effective, so when you see a patch of mushrooms marring your perfectly manicured lawn, the best thing to do is stop gritting your teeth and relax. Take a minute to appreciate the unusual, intricate beauty of fungi before you decide whether or not you want to rip them out.

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