

Edible Wild Mushrooms Are More Than Just Your Next Meal

April 17 2021 9:00 AM



Every spring, a group of enthusiastic woodland hunters scour forests across Illinois in search of elusive and delectable fungi – the morel.

These determined foragers all share in the love and thrill of harvesting a wild morel mushroom, *Morchella* spp, that can't be bought at a grocery store. Native mushrooms are incredibly difficult to produce due to a lack of understanding about the conditions needed to grow them.

“Wild morels definitely rule the spring, but there are quite a number of other [edible mushrooms](#) that can be found in Illinois, including pheasant backs, chicken-of-the-woods, chanterelles, and my personal favorite, the hen-of-the-woods,” says [Chris Evans, University of Illinois Extension forestry specialist](#).

Mushrooms are the fruiting bodies of larger organisms called fungi. Fungi typically grow as a dense mass of thread-like cells called mycelium. That mycelium collects energy and can produce mushrooms that release spores for reproduction.

“Think of a mushroom as the apple and the fungus as the tree,” Evans says. “If you ever pulled loose bark off of a rotting log, the white or light brown threads that fan out across the surface is part of the mycelium and is the main body of the fungus.”

There are many different types of fungi, and not all of them produce mushrooms, but each is important to the health of native ecosystems by enriching the soil and rotting wood, which creates homes for wildlife.

Fungi do not produce their own food through photosynthesis like plants. Instead, many attack and feed off other organisms growing on living trees, dead wood or the soil.

“Many of our native plant species actually need the help of a fungus to grow,” Evans says. “These fungi will associate with the roots of plants to form structures called mycorrhizae that help uptake nutrients and transport water to the plant roots.”

Morels are saprophytic, meaning they get energy from dead organic matter. Some other saprophytic mushrooms, such as chicken-of-the-woods and oyster mushrooms, grow on dead wood.

[Edible mycorrhizal mushrooms](#) include chanterelles, which are some of the most common Illinois mushrooms in the summer, and truffles which compete with morels as being the most famous wild mushrooms worldwide.