

The mystery of fall Mushrooms

Every fall, strange and mysterious plants seem to pop up over night in Island forests and fields. as slime molds, mushrooms, toad stools, earth tongues and other fungi make their annual appearance. Years ago this new growth seemed strangely out of place as if nature was making one last (but very odd) attempt to recreate the lush growth of spring. However, instead of green leaves and colourful flowers, these plants produced no foliage and formed unfamiliar shapes and patterns. They often grew on dead or dying plants or rose from the cold damp soil of late fall.

They also had properties that often seemed magical. Some fungi were highly valued as food and others had medicinal or healing powers. At the same time, some contained mind-altering hallucinogens or produced toxins that sickened or even killed careless livestock and humans. The cool damp fall weather also led to fungal infections in crops, sometimes ruining the summer's work and leading to hunger and disease. Over the years, these strange properties led people to create myths around fungi. These beliefs are underscored by the fact that many fungi appear just around Halloween. Over time, they created a connection between supernatural beings and the fungi growing all around them.

Today, these beliefs are reflected in the common names for many fungi - names that people used to interpret their world and explain something that seemed to be unexplainable. For instance, an earth tongue called *Dead Man's Fingers* is common on PEI. Clumps of long, thin, yellow stems reach out from the cold damp earth of late autumn reminding people of fingers. It was thought that if these fingers touched you, you would soon be joining the ranks of the dead.

Another small woodland mushroom that grows in softwood and mixed wood stands is the *Witches Hat Mushroom*. Its conically-shaped orange cap reminded people of witches hats, a name that has stuck for hundreds of years.

Fairy Rings are also common in Island pastures and forests. It was said that little fairies joined hands to dance at night and these colourful rings were their tracks. Spells could be cast in the center of the ring and those under a spell had to find the ring and break it to let the magic out.

Another Island fungus which has a direct linkage to people's beliefs is an orangish-yellow slime mold which appears on dead standing hardwood trees in October and November. This jelly-like material is called *Witches Butter* and it was rumored that they would eat it during Halloween rituals. Others believed that it was the sign of hex or curse. The person under the curse had to pierce the skin of the *Witches Butter* with a pin and allow the sap inside to leak out thus ending the power of the hex.

The walking trails of the six Demonstration Woodlots www.gov.pe.ca/forestry/demo make wonderful places to visit during the Halloween season.