

# Mushrooms Through the Seasons

While the most popular, morel mushrooms are just one of a select number of edible fungi species in Nebraska.

Story and photos by Julie Geiser

Nebraska's mushroom hunters typically consist of those seeking the sponge-like morel mushroom that appears in the sandy soils of the state's major river valleys each spring. Once the morel season has dissipated, most mushroom collectors assume that the mushroom season is over – yet die hard hunters know that the collecting has only begun.

The key to fungi hunting starts by learning the habits of favored mushrooms – timing is everything: a few days too early and mushrooms will not be visible, hidden under a mulch layer of leaves, dirt and wood; too late and they will be gone – all dried up or occupied by bugs.

Starting in spring the desirable morel mushrooms start to appear after a nice rain or snow melt with warm temperatures following.

## Morels

The morel (*Morchella*) is one of the most unmistakable fungi. All morels have a round to cone-shaped cap that is honeycombed with pits and ridges that resemble a sponge. Morels have a short stalk and are hollow through the cap and stem and host a warm brown to tan or yellowish color.

False morels should not be mistaken for morels and should not be eaten. They will have a cotton-like fiber in the stem. Sliced long ways the difference is noticeable as false mushrooms are not hollow. The cap will not be honeycombed and pitted like the morel and will be red-brown, brown or yellow-brown.

Widely scattered or clustered morels can be found in a variety of places; they like loose, sandy soil with high humidity and decaying vegetation

that can be found in wooded areas, hardwood forests with ash and elm trees, riparian woodlands, fruit orchards and sandy soils near rivers and streams. Look for them under conifers and in ravines and deciduous woodlands; recently burned areas and disturbed areas will also produce morels.

Scan for early morels in dense underbrush and around fallen trees and river banks on south-facing slopes and open areas in woodlands where the sun can penetrate the ground – later on, hit the shaded and north-facing slopes. Use a walking stick to carefully move leaves and debris out of the way to reveal morels hidden on the forest floor. Once you train your eyes to “see” morels collecting will be easier.

When gathering, pinch the morel at the base and gently twist to break the stem or carry a small knife to cut the

stems. Then place the mushrooms in a mesh bag. This allows your morels to breathe, keeping them fresh and it lets some of the bugs fall out.

The morel season can last several weeks in Nebraska depending on local conditions – soil moisture and temperature are contributing factors of the morel's arrival. Many morel collectors look for warm rains followed by sunny days with night temperatures above 45 degrees and ground temperatures of 50-60 degrees to prompt the fruiting body of this mushroom to arrive. A morel will emerge, grow and die in about four to six days. Many hunters heed old-time advice and head to the woods when the lilacs bloom. Be on the lookout for morels from mid-to-late April through May.

Sliced, breaded, seasoned and fried, morels are a delectable treat. There are many creative ways to cook and eat morels and many ways to preserve them for future use. Always be sure to cook morels before eating them to prevent illness.

## Sulfur Shelf

The sulfur shelf, more commonly known as chicken-of-the-woods, is a mushroom that should be admired for not only its flavor but its unique beauty. It looks like something you would find on a coral reef.

This large, fleshy fungi starts small or fingerlike and soon becomes fan-shaped with overlapping clusters stacked on top of one another. Its smooth to suede-like surface is often uneven or wrinkled.

The sulphur shelf has no real stem and its caps grow in large, individual “shelves” ranging from two to 10 inches across and up to 10 inches long. The caps have whitish to yellowish



Morels are one of the most unmistakable mushrooms with their cone-shaped, honeycombed cap encompassed with pits and ridges that resemble a sponge.



True morels (top) are hollow, while false morels (bottom) contain a stalk throughout the mushroom.

ILLUSTRATION BY TIM REIGERT



The sulfur shelf, or chicken-of-the-woods, mushroom is easy to distinguish with its bright colors and is a good mushroom for the beginner collector.





The shaggy mane is both an urban and suburban mushroom – it is so widely distributed it can occur almost anywhere. Get shaggy manes to the frying pan quickly as they deteriorate rapidly.

fruits from the ground opposed to growing on trees. From pastures, roadsides, gardens, lawns and parking lots the shaggy mane is both an urban and suburban mushroom – it is so widely distributed it can occur almost anywhere.

Not only are these mushrooms edible but they are delicious with a light taste and great texture. Slice in half, dip in egg batter and bread crumbs and then sauté. But get them to the pan soon after picking, as they can deteriorate rapidly, or freeze them for future use.

Look for shaggy manes in late summer and fall.

### Giant Puffballs

Giant puffballs are sought-after delicacies that are large, round to oblong “balls” that grow alone or in groups on the ground in pastures, meadows, grasslands, along roads and other open places. Puffballs may be baseball-sized or as large as a soccer ball.

Young puffballs have a white, spongy interior, which is when they are prime for eating. As they age they become brown and discolored. At that time their skin will crack and trillions of powdery internal spores will be released.

Correctly identifying this mushroom is crucial. Puffballs should have a thick, white flesh inside; don’t eat anything with a brown, black, purple or yellow interior. The white flesh should not have gills in it – if there is any evidence of gills, dispose of immediately.

Deadly amanitas look similar to a puffball with a universal veil that surrounds the young mushroom. Slicing the mushroom will help identify a puffball from an amanita as the embryonic outline of a cap, gills and stem of the amanita will be revealed.

Puffballs should be used soon after harvesting or refrigerated for future use. They have a rich, nutty flavor, and absorb flavors that they are cooked with. Puffballs are good fried in a

pores on the underside with no gills.

This mushroom is easy to distinguish with its bright colors and is a good mushroom for the beginner collector as it has no look-alikes.

Its colors range from red-orange to bright orange, yellow-orange and sulfur yellow or salmon when the fungi is young. The flesh is thick, soft and full of water when fresh and will become tough, lose some color and eventually crumble with age.

Masses of sulfur shelf grow on dead stumps and logs of hardwoods or conifers and will sometimes appear on live trees or on roots and buried wood. This mushroom doesn’t need much moisture to fruit.

Picking smaller, knobby caps as they first emerge are the best for eating. To harvest larger or older mushrooms, trim off the tender flesh near the outer edges of the cap, remove any hard, woody flesh, and then cook. When cut, the tender flesh will leak a clear, watery juice.

This variety tastes and looks much like lemony chicken when cooked. It is good sautéed, deep fried, baked or

used in soups. However, some people may have an adverse reaction to this mushroom so try a small taste the first time to see how it makes you feel.

Then remember where you first found them, because they will appear on the same stumps year after year showing up in late summer and early fall.

### Shaggy Mane

Shaggy mane is distinctive and easy to recognize – they grow solitary or in tight groups, preferring hard ground and grassy areas with rich or disturbed soil. This mushroom has an elongated shaped, shaggy cap with brownish upturned scales and a straight, semi-smooth stem.

This mushroom is also known as “inky cap,” as the gills and often the caps digest themselves at maturity, turning into an inky black fluid that will drip to the ground. This auto-digestion helps disperse spores into the air to produce a future crop.

This 2- to 6-inch tall mushroom



Always cut puffball mushrooms in half to check color and for the embryonic outline of a cap, gills and stem of the deadly amanita mushroom.

batter, sautéed alone or with vegetables and occur in late summer and fall. It is imperative to know what mushrooms you are collecting – some species of mushrooms in Nebraska are poisonous.

The morel, sulfur shelf, shaggy mane and puffball described here are some of

the most recognizable of the edibles. It is unwise to eat any mushroom when in doubt about genus and species, so stick to these Nebraska edibles if you’re a beginning mushroom hunter. These are more than enough to keep you busy throughout the year. ■



Sliced quarter-inch thick, puffballs can be dipped in an egg batter, coated with flour and cinnamon and fried until golden brown like French toast. Top with a pear slice.

## Turkey Tail

The turkey tail is a small, fan-shaped mushroom that boasts a tough texture but is leathery and supple when fresh.

The fans resemble that of a strutting tom turkey, are covered with fine hairs and have bands of contrasting colors ranging from white, gray, brown, yellow, buff to bluish, reddish or black and sometimes greenish from algae. Its flesh is thin and has virtually no stalk.

This polypore mushroom has a long history of medicinal use in China dating back to the mid-1300s during the Ming Dynasty because of its immune-boosting capabilities. Turkey tails are most popularly known as being a natural source of the anti-cancer Polysaccharide-K or PSK, which is a carbohydrate found in the fruit bodies and in the mycelium of turkey tails.

Turkey tails can be consumed by drinking the tea made by boiling them for a prolonged period of time. Some mushroom hunters will chew the fresh caps like gum or use them to make ornaments or jewelry.

This mushroom typically grows in rows, tiers, or overlapping clusters on logs, stumps or fallen branches of hardwoods, thriving mostly on decaying matter. At times it will thrive on live trees, but rarely appears on conifers. Turkey tails are commonplace and widely distributed year-long, and can even be found fruiting during winter.



The turkey tail is often researched as a medicinal mushroom.