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# Fungi and mushrooms

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## What is a fungus?



Fungi are among the most widely distributed organisms on earth and are of great environmental and medical importance. There are about 144,000 known species of fungi. These includes yeasts, rusts, smuts, mildews, molds, and mushrooms.

Many fungi are free-living in soil or water; others form parasitic or symbiotic relationships with plants or animals.

Sulphur tuft and lepiota grande found in Crane Park.

## Fungi are everywhere



Horn of plenty, a strong tasting mushroom and chicken in the woods said to taste like chicken found in local woodlands.

Fungi are everywhere in very large numbers—in the soil and the air, in rivers, the seas, on and within plants and animals, in food and clothing, and in the human body.

They are responsible for breaking down organic matter and releasing carbon, oxygen, nitrogen, and phosphorus into the soil and the atmosphere.

As well as eating mushrooms, we make use of them in many household and industrial processes including the making of bread, wine, beer, and cheeses.

Penicillin, derived from yeast, is also a fungi.

# What's in a name?

The late summer and early autumn, when the temperatures fall and there is moisture in the air, is a good time to spot fungi. Take a look in your garden and see if you can find anything particularly on rotting wood.



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Some fungi have very descriptive names:- orange peel fungus, fan bracket, chicken in the woods, orange disco, stump puffball, candelabra duster, big bellied webcap, rubber ear, tripe fungus, hare's ear, and flaky bonnet are a few. There is an id chart [here](#) with photos of fungi.

How would you use an earpick fungus?

This rare species grows from rotting pinecones and gets its name from the ear-shaped cap which is covered in spines. It is tough and inedible.

# Fairy Ring

Do you know of any other traditions?  
We would love to hear from you.

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Mushrooms and toadstools use an underground network of hyphae that allow them to grow and spread over a very large area, often several metres in diameter. They obtain food from organic matter through this network and grow outward.

They sometimes form a circle of mushrooms is known as a fairy ring.



"Plucked from the Fairy Circle" A man saves his friend from a fairy ring  
Sikes, Wirt (1880). *British Goblins: Welsh Folk-lore, Fairy Mythology, Legends and Traditions*

In England, fairy rings were places where fairies come to dance. The mushrooms around the perimeter were seats where the sprites could rest.

Other European countries have similar traditions, but one common theme is the belief that dire consequences await anyone foolish enough to enter a fairy ring. Trespassers could be struck blind or lame, or even disappear to become slaves in the fairies' underground realm.

# Other traditions

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Many cultures wonderful explanations for the origins of fungi. In parts of Africa, mushrooms were sometimes regarded as symbols of the human soul.

In parts of Central America a children's tale tells how mushrooms are umbrellas carried by woodland spirits to shelter them from the rain. The spirits leave the mushrooms behind at dawn when it is time to return to their underground world.

Explore mushrooms in art and pictures [here](#).  
Somerset House show, Mushrooms: The Art,  
Design and Future of Fungi (30 January to 26  
April 2020)



**Mindful Mushroom by Seana  
Gavin**

# Investigating mushrooms at home

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Hygrocybe Coccinea by Beatrix Potter



Mushroom spores are very small and can only be seen with a microscope. Mature mushrooms have thousands of spores but can be seen by taking a spore print. Cut off the stem and place the cap, with the gills facing down, on a piece of white paper. Put a drop of water on the top of the cap to help release the spores. Cover the cap with a glass and leave for 2-24 hours, depending on the humidity and the freshness of the mushroom. The spores will fall on the paper, making a spore print pattern. spray them lightly with an artist spray or hair spray! Send us a photos of your artwork.