

Chautauqua Watershed Notes
From the Chautauqua Watershed Conservancy
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Mushrooms Abound
By Mark Baldwin



Although there are no foolproof methods for determining edible or poisonous mushrooms, the giant puffball, especially one this size, is readily identifiable - and delicious!

Cool. Wet. That pretty much sums up summer in the Chautauqua Watershed so far. June is usually the highest rainfall month of the year in our region but this June was extraordinary: my backyard rain gauge measured eight-plus inches total for the month, which was probably typical. This morning (July 15) we awoke to temperatures in the 40's. So if your tomatoes are in a holding pattern and you're still harvesting peas at the same time bush beans are coming in, that's just the kind of summer we're having.

Mushrooms are another natural phenomenon that the cool wet weather is bringing on. Remember, when you see a mushroom you're seeing only the "fruit," which is attached to a network you don't see called a mycelium. A mushroom is analogous to an apple growing on a tree. Pick the apple, and the tree is still there. Pick a mushroom and the mycelium also remains but unseen, underground or in the rotting wood of a dead or dying tree.

Some kinds of fungi really seem to be strictly seasonal as to when they produce fruiting bodies. For instance, if you want to find the delicious morel mushroom you need to go to your favorite spot to harvest them "when oak leaves are the size of squirrels' ears." Otherwise you'll miss out. (I didn't find a single one this year anyway, unfortunately.) Other kinds of fungi seem to have a more flexible schedule.

Earlier this month my friend and co-worker Marlene announced that her grandson had discovered a giant puffball fungus, which he picked and proudly presented to his grandma. What a treat. Marlene sliced the huge puffball and sautéed it in butter for all to share. I associate the delicate flavor of this particular mushroom with the last days of summer – not this early! But nature is full of surprises. Apparently the giant puffball's mycelium body had had enough moisture with our early summer rains to signal a fruiting body to start growing above ground.

The giant puffball (*Calvatia gigantea*) is one of three or four edible wild fungi that cannot readily be mistaken for any poisonous mushrooms and therefore safe for beginning mushroom hunters to harvest. Perhaps you've discovered giant puffballs this early too. You may find them in rich disturbed soil, especially in open places such as pastures. They also grow on golf courses, but you should avoid harvesting these as they readily absorb the chemicals often applied in such areas. A giant puffball is unmistakable: softball to volleyball size, roundish, smooth with a "kid leather" texture, growing directly from the ground with no stem. If you intend to harvest one to eat (and feed the neighborhood) make sure it's pure white through and through – later on the flesh will turn yellow to olive-brown and inedible.

You can treat giant puffball flesh as you would any cultivated mushroom but my favorite way to prepare it is sliced about half an inch thick and sautéed in butter, perhaps with a bit of garlic – a delicious taste of summer in the Chautauqua Watershed!

The CWC is a local 501(c)(3) not-for-profit supported primarily by membership donations whose mission is to preserve and enhance the water quality, scenic beauty and ecological health of the lakes, streams and watersheds of the Chautauqua region. To support these efforts, call 716-664-2166.