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As puffball season approaches, it pays to know your mushroom

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SPECIAL TO THE SUN

Some years back a group of teen-agers in Wisconsin received medical treatment after inhaling the spores of fungi known as puffballs. They were operating under the false belief that the mushroom spores from this "devil's snuffbox" were hallucinogenic. They went on a trip, but not the one that they were expecting. They ended up in a local hospital suffering from respiratory distress.

Now that we are approaching the puffball season (late summer to autumn), it is important to know more about these fungi common throughout the country and especially in Arkansas. Although not hallucinogenic, these edible mushrooms are a culinary delight.

They have the outward appearance of white to brown spheres, sometimes with short stalks. Cutting open an immature puffball reveals

white flesh that is edible. A very moist summer is usually the prelude for a great puffball harvest.

Depending on the species, puffballs range widely in size, from being as little as a marble to larger than a soccer ball. Their shape also varies by species, from completely round to looking like an inverted pear. Puffballs can be found growing on wood, often in large clusters, to living solitarily or in small clusters on the ground in forests and open areas like lawns and pastures.

The giant puffball is one of the most unmistakable fungi: It can reach more than a foot in diameter and weigh several pounds. So large in fact are these fungi, that from a distance, the giant puffball has been mistaken by some as sheep. Once it matures, a large specimen may contain more than 7 trillion spores; this is about 1,000 spores for every person alive on earth today.

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Heather Hallen holds a giant puffball.

Dr. Tom Volk | Special to The Sun

PUFFBALLS: Many recipes are available for use with puffballs

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The recipes for cooking puffballs are as varied as they are legendary. They include puffball parmesan, baked chicken and puffballs, and scallops with broccoli and puffballs. One of the most popular ways to prepare them however is for breakfast since they blend so well with eggs. Preparation can be as simple as slicing and frying these in butter.

Mushrooms are a good source of vitamin B, vitamin C, copper, selenium, and iron. A serving of 5 medium mushrooms contains more riboflavin (a form of vitamin B) than a Porterhouse steak, a hardboiled egg, a serving of cheddar cheese or a serving of pepperoni.

If the outer part of the puffball is covered by a thick rind, then this is not a "true" puffball but a "false" one, sometimes called earthballs. Earthballs are poisonous. Also, the immature stage of some gilled mushrooms may mimic the puffball in appearance. A puffball that is edible will have a white flesh that is homogeneous throughout. A poisonous lookalike will have hints of an immature gilled mushroom that forms a "T" shape on the inside of the round fruiting body. For this reason, puffballs should be cut in half to check them. Thus, no wild mushroom should ever be eaten unless it is correctly identified as being edible. Unlike many mushrooms, puffballs are virtually impossible to keep fresh and if frozen they

lose their taste.

All puffball species are edible, if prepared and eaten while they are white and solid. When puffballs mature, they contain a dust-like mass of spores. If they have become discolored and spores are present, they may produce a bad stomach reaction.

Besides being used as food, some people have found medicinal purposes for them. For example, among Native American, European and Asian cultures, mature dried puffballs were applied to wounds to stop bleeding and help blood clot. This method was used to treat wounded soldiers during the Civil War especially when bandages were in short supply.

When the puffball matures, an opening or multiple cracks develop on the surface of the ball through which the spores escape. The spewing of the spores can be initiated by raindrops, air currents or touch. The spores launched into the atmosphere eventually fall back to earth where some germinate to form new colonies that eventually produce a new generation of these intriguing fungi.

For more information contact the Department of Biological Sciences at Arkansas State at: biology@astate.edu.

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