

A Mushroom Explosion

AGRI-VIEWS

by Chuck Otte, Geary County Extension Agent

It started at Rotary Club on Tuesday when someone at my table asked what was going on with all the mushrooms. While I was explaining it a photo and a text came buzzing in on my phone - a photo of mushrooms. It's continued on pretty much non-stop since then! We tend to see some mushrooms, or toadstools if you prefer, every year in late summer. With the drought and now the rain, this year it's really magnified, or perhaps amplified is a better word, and we are seeing mushrooms exploding out of the ground almost everywhere!

Mushrooms are, to put it in simplest terms, the fruiting body of a fungal organism. They are neither plant, animal or mineral. Fungi are in their own kingdom and do things their own way. The parent organism of the fungi is called a mycelium. If you've ever dug up an old tree root or rotting stump and noticed cobwebby strands around and in the partially rotted wood, then you have seen the mycelium. Mushrooms arise from this mycelium when we have the right weather conditions. Spores, or "mushroom seeds", they aren't formed or act like plant seeds, are released by the mushroom. These spores float in the wind and if they land in a suitable habitat with food, they will start to develop a new mycelium of that species of fungi.

It's important to understand that these mushrooms develop from an organism that is underground. There is nothing you can spray on the lawn or soil to stop them from developing. The fungus is actually very beneficial as it is breaking down organic matter back into the basic elements for other plants to use for growth. When you see big circles of mushrooms in a lawn, you can often see a dark green grass ring as well. The nutrients released as the fungus decomposed the organic matter fertilized that small area. In the case of fairy rings (mushrooms growing in a circle) as the fungus finishes breaking down the organic matter it keeps growing outwardly to feed on, or decompose, more organic matter. So the ring keeps getting bigger.

Some mushrooms will emerge from known old tree roots. We have the remains of an old stump next to the Extension Office that is sprouting a lot of mushrooms right now. Some fungi feed on old grass roots. The aforementioned fairy rings are classic cases of that. Some fungi are very specific to certain species of trees and will only be found growing under or around oaks, or ash or maples. Some people use toadstool to refer to the classic mushroom on a stalk with a cap. But mushrooms can also look like pigs ears or puffballs or shelf fungi growing on the side of trees. All of these are technically mushrooms.

The best conditions for most mushrooms is warm, wet and humid conditions. These are exactly the conditions we've been seeing for the past week or so. Once these conditions came along I was pretty certain that the mushrooms were going to start exploding everywhere in short order, and they did.

I am frequently asked about the edibility of some of these late summer mushrooms. Don't ask me because I won't answer. Separating some of the quite delicious late summer mushrooms growing in lawns or prairies from those that are mildly poisonous to deadly poisonous is not something I'm willing to take on. There is too great of a responsibility and I will not be responsible for someone being poisoned! If mushrooms are in your yard and they annoy you, just break them off and toss them in the trash. Keep doing it as new ones emerge. But please do not ask me if you can eat them!