

Fairy Rings Are Popping Up

AGRI-VIEWS

by Chuck Otte, Geary County Extension Agent

When we have wet weather in July and August two things are guaranteed to happen. First of all we'll have an explosion of mosquitoes. Secondly, mushrooms will start showing up everywhere but especially in lawns. Mid to late summer is also the time that we get not just mushrooms, but fairy rings of mushrooms.

As a mushroom refresher, remember that mushrooms come from a fungus organism often living underground feeding on and breaking down decaying organic matter. These fungi are one of the important methods that help organic matter (which can be dead plant roots of any kind, old tree stumps, even dead parts of living trees) to be broken down into plant nutrients for growing plants to use.

When the fungi organism reaches a certain age (they can live for years) and the weather conditions, specifically temperature and moisture, are just right, it will produce mushrooms. A mushroom's sole purpose is to release mature spores (think of them as mushroom seeds) that blow around in the wind and hopefully land in a location suitable for the fungal organism to grow. Just as an apple or pear contain the seed of the tree, mushrooms contain the seed for the fungus.

There are about fifty species of fungi that produce what we call fairy rings. In fairy rings you have a circle of mushrooms or a part of a circle. Often associated with this is a ring of dark green grass and occasionally just inside of that will be a circle of reduced growth or dead grass. As you travel around the area start looking for these mushrooms and dark circles of grass. Sometimes you'll see the dark circle and no mushrooms at all. Sometimes you'll see the mushrooms and may not notice a dark green ring. This is more likely the case in highly managed and fertilized lawns.

It is thought that a single spore started a new fungal colony in a spot. As the fungus used up all the food it started expanding out looking for new food and the part of the fungus in the center died. Year after year it just keeps expanding out. The fungus breaks down organic matter and releases nutrients. The grass plants in the immediate area make use of the nutrients with darker green growth. The occasional dead spots are where the dead fungus organism has made such a thick underground mat that water can't penetrate it and the vegetation there dies.

If something interrupts the food source such as lack of organic matter or some kind of soil disturbance, then part of the fairy ring disappears, but where there is adequate food, it just keeps going. Sometimes fairy rings will grow into each other and you may wind up with an oval or ellipse.

There is no real way to stop these from happening and you don't want to ultimately because they are part of the natural "recycling program". The actual fungi may be six to twelve inches underground or even deeper. If a homeowner is bothered by them, the green rings can be covered up with extra fertilizer over the rest of the lawn and the individual mushrooms can be mowed off or plucked and tossed.

Some fairy ring mushrooms are good to eat, some can be deadly. Unless you are a mushroom expert you should never sample a mushroom out of curiosity! The results can be uncomfortable to deadly! In the long run mushrooms tend to be short lived so I encourage people to just enjoy them for yet another example of the wonders of the natural world!