

Get Wild: Tips for wild mushroom hunting

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Joan Betz
Get Wild



A variety of mushrooms are collected in August in the Pebble Creek area of Summit County.
Photo by Joan Betz / Eagle Summit Wilderness Alliance

On a hike into our local wilderness after warm days and rain, you might be treated to the sudden appearance, or “fruiting,” of a variety of mushrooms. Mushrooms are the fruits of their plant’s network of tiny fibers (mycelium) in the soil or rotting logs, and their spores (like seeds) can disperse to create new plants.

Picking a mushroom doesn’t destroy the underlying plant just as picking an apple doesn’t destroy its tree. In Summit County, mushroom season is often mid-July through early September, depending on rainfall, which is why we hadn’t seen many mushrooms in recent drier years.

Learning to identify different mushrooms can provide extra enjoyment to a hike.

Wild mushrooms are essential to the well-being of our forests and wilderness areas. Without them, fallen trees would just pile up. Mushrooms are fungi and differ from green plants in that they lack chlorophyll to make their own food by photosynthesis. Mushrooms are scavengers, decomposing organic material in leaf litter, logs or even dung, and recycle nutrients in the soil. While some are parasites and kill living trees, other mushrooms form beneficial relationships with specific trees, their mycelium in close contact with tree roots.

It is permissible to pick mushrooms for personal use in the White River National Forest, but not in wilderness areas, with a free yearly permit from the Dillon Ranger District. I suggest using a basket for collecting, to avoid squashing in a backpack. Be sure to leave many for wildlife and avoid destroying the underground mycelium.

It's important to appreciate the beauty of diverse shapes, sizes and colors as well as the important role they play in our forest ecosystem, but it's also important to know which ones are safe to eat.

While some wild mushrooms are edible and quite prized, others are deadly toxic. There is no simple way to distinguish, so the main rule of collecting is know your mushrooms! Take a class, consult guidebooks for Colorado mushrooms (Vera Evenson's "Mushrooms of the Rocky Mountain Region"), or learn from experienced mushroom hunters.

Be sure to learn the unique Latin names of mushrooms, too, because common names can vary in different areas and because Latin names indicate relationships among different species. The name *Amanita muscaria*, for the fly agaric, indicates a pretty red-capped mushroom with white dots belongs to the poisonous *Amanita* group.



This image shows the gills and cup of *Amanita*, left, versus pores of *Leccinum*.
Photo by Joan Betz / Eagle Summit Wilderness Alliance

Other identifying factors include whether mushrooms have a cap situated on a stalk (stem) or, like puffballs, have no stalk. Notice the cap's color and shape, and the presence underneath of gills (like store-bought mushrooms) versus pores or teeth. Does the bottom of the stalk have a cup? (Deadly *Amanita* mushrooms do.) Compare the white gills (white spores), thin stem and cup of the poisonous panther cap *Amanita pantherina*, with the pores (brown spores), thick white stem with black dots of *Leccinum insigne*, the aspen orange cap.



This image shows a dark brown spore print.
Photo by Joan Betz / Eagle Summit Wilderness Alliance

Spore color is critical for identification and can range from white to yellow, brown to black or even pink. To prepare a spore print, place a cap upside down on a sheet of white paper and check later to see the color of fallen spores.

Note the habitat where you found favorite mushrooms – on the ground, on rotting logs or on dung piles and if in aspen or pine forests or meadows – which can help you find similar specimens in the future.

Enjoy your mushroom sleuthing, don't eat anything you're not positive is safe and leave lots for the wildlife!

"Get Wild" publishes on Fridays in the Summit Daily News. Joan Betz is a board member of Eagle Summit Wilderness Alliance, an all-volunteer nonprofit that helps the U.S. Forest Service protect and preserve wilderness areas in Eagle and Summit counties. For more information, visit EagleSummitWilderness.org.



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