

How to safely forage for mushrooms in Summit County

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Amanita muscaria mushrooms, commonly known as the fly agaric or fly amanita, can be found in Summit County and are considered poisonous.

Photo by Bill Betz

It's mushroom season. Mushroom foraging is a unique way to spend time outside, and while it takes more research and preparation than your average trail outing, it's a hobby worth digging into.

Mushroom hunting rules and safety

Adam Bianchi, district ranger for the Dillon Ranger District, explained that you need to obtain a permit from the Forest Service to gather mushrooms. The permit is free and valid for a calendar year, and it can be acquired at the Dillon Ranger Station at 680 Blue River Parkway in Silverthorne. There are no prerequisites for getting a permit. The station will simply ask for basic information and identification, and provide a map and tips for foraging.

"The Forest Service is all about multiple uses, and it's a great way to get out with the family and hike around and kind of explore a little bit off trail sometimes, explore your forest and your national forest in a way that you typically don't think about," Bianchi said.

There are limitations on where you can hunt for mushrooms, Bianchi said. Wilderness areas such as Eagles Nest Wilderness are off limits, and the Forest Service asks that people avoid ski resorts and campgrounds so that foraging doesn't impede on other recreational activities.

Of course, there are poisonous mushrooms out there.

"Be careful what you're picking, there's multiple types of species of mushrooms," Bianchi said. "Do a little research before you go out and start picking."

"Some mushrooms are edible, and some are deadly poisonous ... There is no easy way to tell if a mushroom is safe to eat," Joan Betz, board member of the Eagle Summit Wilderness Alliance, said. "You absolutely just have to study them and learn the mushrooms."

To get to know the mushroom, Betz suggested going on hikes with knowledgeable people, taking a class on mushrooms and reading books about different types of mushrooms. She recommended the books "Mushrooms of Colorado" by Vera Evanson and "Mushrooms of Colorado and Adjacent Areas" by Mary Wells. Betz said there are also apps that can help identify mushrooms, but noted that they shouldn't be used for determining whether a mushroom is safe to eat.

Betz also said people should never eat anything raw, and they should wash their hands if they touch a mushroom that could be poisonous. A common mushroom in the area that is considered poisonous is called the fly agaric, which has a red cap with white dots and is often seen in cartoons.

Generally, identifying mushrooms is harder than identifying wildflowers, Betz said.



Two types of mushrooms are shown side-by-side.

Photo by Joan Betz

How to find mushrooms

“This time of year we’re getting mushrooms coming in and moisture,” Bianchi said. “It’s always a small window, but it’s a lot of fun.”

According to Betz, mid- to late summer is when most mushrooms fruit. She said that this summer has been especially good for mushrooms because of the warm weather and rain.

“If it’s been warm and we get rain, a couple days later, you will see a sudden appearance — which is also called fruiting — of lots of different mushrooms,” Betz said.

Betz explained that when you see a mushroom growing in the ground or on a tree or log, what you’re seeing is similar to a fruit, with the rest of the plant growing inside the log or down in the dirt.

“The rest of the plant is just this huge network of tiny little fibers, the term for all of those fibers together is mycelium,” Betz said.

There are many different kinds of mushrooms, Betz said, and some have a stem and a cap with gills underneath the cap, while others have pores under the cap.

Bolete mushrooms are found high up on the mountains, Betz said, and a common Bolete mushroom found in Summit County is an aspen orange cap that has pores, an orange-red cap and fat, white stem with black dots. Other mushrooms that can be found locally are polypores, which are big mushrooms that grow on the side of trees as well as puffballs that have spores inside.

Betz said chanterelle mushrooms are beautiful orange mushrooms that grow up in dry pines and can sometimes be found in grocery stores.

“Appreciate their beauty and the role that they play, some of them are really quite beautiful,” Betz said of wild mushrooms.

Betz noted that if you pick a mushroom’s fruiting body, you aren’t destroying the plant.

“Word of mouth is usually best for where mushrooms are popping up each given year depending on moisture levels,” Bianchi said.

Bianchi said that areas that have been burned by wildfires are popular places to search for mushrooms, as it is common for them to pop up after a fire.



A *Leccinum* mushroom is displayed.
Photo by Joan Betz

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