

# Get Wild: Mushrooms, Christmas and winter solstice

Stasia Stockwell



**Amanita muscaria mushrooms have historic significance during winter solstice, with its red caps and white specks.**

*Alexander Kliem/Courtesy photo*

There are many winter solstice traditions that exist for cultures around the world. But one in particular involves a little red mushroom that's common in Colorado and many other parts of the world: the amanita muscaria, often called fly agaric. While mushrooms often cause me to recall foraging on cool fall days, and those fungi have long since been covered by a blanket of snow at Colorado's high elevations, this particular 'shroom is a winter holiday emblem. It's the mushroom you see when you picture the classic red-and-white-speckled toadstools of folklore and fairy tales, and it has long played an important role in wintertime traditions among many cultures.

Amanita muscaria mushrooms are common fungi that can be found in both coniferous and deciduous forests across the Northern Hemisphere. They love temperate regions like Colorado, along with more northern boreal forests. Their white stalks with a small apron and vibrant, cherry-red caps with little white specks and white gills underneath make these mushrooms distinctive and easy to spot among the green and brown undergrowth of the forest floor. At lower elevations, and in many other parts of the Northern Hemisphere, this mushroom can still be found sprouting up from the ground in the days and weeks leading up to the winter solstice.

While amanita muscaria likes to grow near some of the choicest edible mushrooms in the high country (like king boletes), these fungi have some unfriendly toxins hiding in their flesh. But, history shows that people of various cultures decided to test their luck by ingesting them (and some still do so today). Amanita muscaria mushrooms are toxic and can cause severe digestive and abdominal discomfort, yet death from ingestion is rare. And, along with that severe discomfort, may come hallucinations. And so, people accepted the consequences in hopes of a spiritual experience.

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Northern indigenous cultures in particular honored the winter solstice as an important time of change and rebirth. As a part of their celebrations, dried amanita muscaria would be consumed by shamans. Similar traditions existed for many cultures in Asia.

With the winter solstice so close to the Christmas holiday, legends speculate that our fantasies of Santa Claus and his flying reindeer came about because of the psychedelic trips and subsequent stories from people ingesting these little red mushrooms. Perhaps it makes sense: The red and white colors of Christmas and Santa's coat are reminiscent of the red-and-white speckled fly agaric mushroom.

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It's not just humans who like these mushrooms. Santa's reindeer love to snack on them too, although they may not be as affected by the toxins. Amanita muscaria mushrooms are an important food source for reindeer across the north, from Alaska to Scandinavia and beyond, and often indigenous peoples of the north would snack on these mushrooms alongside the reindeer around solstice time. Down in Colorado, plenty of our woodland critters snack on these mushrooms, too, including squirrels and deer.

While you may not want to go dig up an Amanita from underneath the snow to consume around the Christmas tree (please, don't do that), you may find yourself thinking a little more about these mushrooms this time of year and all the miraculous ways fungi have played a hand in shaping our culture. As a mushroom lover with a fascination for fungi myself, I'll skip the tradition of consuming amanita muscaria to celebrate the winter solstice. But, I'll be adding a little red mushroom ornament to my tree to remind me of how fascinating nature is, even in the dark of winter.



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