

A FASCINATION WITH FUNGI

WANT TO LEARN MORE ABOUT WILD MUSHROOMS IN THE GARDEN? RETIRED MYCOLOGIST RON SPINOSA CAN HELP.

By Ron Spinosa, Garden Naturalist

Who remembers Euell Gibbons? Come on now, I know some of you boomers do. Gibbons was the original “Mr. Natural,” and he launched the first wave of foraging for wild edibles back in the 1960s. (He also starred in those 1970s commercials for Grape Nuts.) After foraging came flower power and love-ins and the “back-to-nature” movement, which evolved into eco-activism and the green movement of today. I know this because, as an aging hippie, I was part of all that, and when I came across Gibbons’ book *Stalking the Wild Asparagus* (published in 1962), I headed out to the forests and fields, eating all the exotic tubers, berries and weeds I could find.

Gibbons didn’t have a lot to say about fungi, and in those days I had never even considered eating a wild mushroom. But he did mention morels and, one day, as I was riding my bike down a country road, I noticed two yellow sponge-like growths under a tree. A light bulb flashed in my head, and I thought: “Morels!” I immediately recognized them from the book, and morels are so unique, they really grab your attention when you spot them.

After harvesting the mushrooms, I went back to my book to double check the identifying features and felt confident that they were, in fact, that fabulous fungus. That’s because morels are one of the few mushrooms that even a rank beginner can easily identify. Clyde Christenson, a University of Minnesota mycologist, calls morels one of the “Foolproof Four,” meaning that even beginners can identify them and eat them without fear. (The other three mushrooms are giant puffball, sulfur shelf and shaggy mane.)

Despite my correct identification, I was still nervous about eating the mushrooms. Most people are very wary of eating wild mushrooms—and they should be, because many are poisonous. But I went ahead and fried them up in butter; and, once I tasted them, I was hooked. I wanted to learn everything I could about wild, edible mushrooms. Knowing this, my girlfriend got me a mushroom field guide for my birthday. But using the guide was a struggle. I was able to master a few mushrooms, but there is definitely a steep learning curve to mushrooms (something wildflower lovers are no doubt familiar with, too).

Luckily, a few years later I found out about and joined the Minnesota Mycological Society. As part of the mushroom club, I was able to talk with experienced mentors who helped me identify mushrooms and observe important things about them, not just with my eyes, but by touching and smelling them. As it turned out, that fateful bicycle ride started me down a road that has led to a lifelong passion for mycology and the company of the fascinating breed of folks who are mycophiles. Now, some 30 years later, my passion for mushrooms has led me to the Eloise Butler Wildflower Garden as a new naturalist, looking forward to sharing my love of fungi and nature with others.

I had been retired for a couple of years when the wonderful opportunity to work at the Garden came my way this season. It is a real privilege to participate in the project that Eloise Butler began in 1907. Eloise was a botanist, but in those days fungi were considered plants that grew without sunlight. Mycology was a subdiscipline within botany, and a good botanist would know her mushrooms as well as her plants. Eloise Butler and her successor, Martha Crone, were both avid and knowledgeable mycologists,

and there are frequent notes about mushrooms in their journals. Here is one of my favorite notes from *The Wild Gardener: The Life and Selected Writings of Eloise Butler*:

“Sometimes bracket fungi assume strange shapes. Some have been found to resemble the head of Napoleon. Some species are phosphorescent and light up the dusky woodland with a ghostly glow that makes the bones of the timorous quake.”

Just a few days after coming across this note, I experienced the eerie green glow of those very mushrooms after doing a full-moon tour in the garden. The mushroom species responsible, *Panellus stipticus*, is small, humble and easily overlooked. It grows on old logs and is in abundance in the garden—if you know where to look. So the next time you are taking a stroll through our beautiful garden, please pay attention to that other kingdom, equal in stature to plants and animals: the fungi. ■

Note: Longtime garden naturalist Diana Thottungal, has diligently continued Eloise Butler’s and Martha Crone’s mycological work by documenting the mycofloral diversity of the Garden for many years.



All of these photos were taken in the Garden this season by Ron Spinosa, except for the photo of hexagonal pored polypore, which was taken by Diana Thottungal. The train wrecker (*Ganoderma lucidum*) Bird’s nest fungus (*Cyathus striatus*) Honey mushroom (*Armillaria mellea*) Luminescent panellus (*Panellus stipticus*) Hexagonal pored polypore (*Polyporus alveolaris*) and in the background: False turkey tails (*Stereum ostrea*)