

# MUSHROOMS IN WINTER

by Katherine Clough, Charlottetown

Winter mushrooms are about as edible as shoe leather. They are not treats for the mushroom gourmet but they are one of the more prominent features of our winter flora.

Most winter mushrooms are what we call bracket fungi. These are the tough, often semicircular structures growing singly or in clusters on the bark of living or dead trees. They are there at other seasons of the year as well but in summer and fall appreciation of them is often eclipsed by attention to all the other species we find. In winter they stand out on the trunks and branches of deciduous and coniferous trees.

Mushrooms grow from spores. Spores are like seeds; they germinate and grow into the mushroom plant which is a network of fine threads called mycelium. In the case of bracket fungi this network develops in the tree and causes decay. It is nature's way of weeding out the dead and dying trees. When the mycelium is mature and conditions are right, it pushes out through an opening in the tree forming the bracket from which new spores are produced. Spores are produced on the underside of the mushroom which may consist of pores, gills, or teeth, or it may be smooth.

One of the most beautiful winter fungi is Polyporus versicolor or Turkey Tail as it is sometimes called. The upper surface has concentric zones of brown, tan, red and grey and is silky to touch. This mushroom grows in clusters on the ends of logs or from wounds. Each cap is thin and leathery and about 2-3" wide.

The varnish shelf, Ganoderma tsugae is a large shelflike fungus with a glossy reddish top; it really looks as if it has been varnished, and can be found on stumps and logs.

A favourite for the winter mushroom hunter is the artist's conk, Ganoderma applanatum; this species can grow to be 2 feet in diameter. The upper surface is grey and has concentric rounded ridges, the under surface is white and stains brown when scratched.

The most common bracket fungus in P.E.I. is the birch polypore, Polyporus betulinus; it grows only on birch trees. The upper surface is light beige or white, and is convex with an inrolled margin. Pits or cracks are often seen on this surface. The underside has white pores which darken with age.

Besides the brackets, there are other types of fungi to be found in winter. The black knot cankers on cherry trees are very prominent on leafless branches. You may also find witch's butter in cracks in the bark of many trees. This fungus forms small lobed gelatinous masses which are yellow or orange. It is edible but not very tasty.

When the snow begins to thaw look for one of the earliest mushrooms of the year: this is the devil's urn, Urnulla craterium. As its name suggest this curious mushroom resembles a brown or black urn about two inches high. It grows in clusters on logs and can be found in late March and April.



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Ganoderma applanatum - Artist's Conk