

Yard and Garden 06-20-2015 Ted Griess / Extension Horticulture Assistant

Of late, I am reminded of an old saying, “At ease disease; there’s a fungus among us.” Although we’ve received a tremendous amount of good from the recent abundant rains, they have also contributed some problems — namely flooding. However, today’s article is not about flooding ; rather it’s about strange, plant-like organisms called fungi (plural) or fungus (singular) that are also appearing as a result of the plentiful rains.

Typically, in the spring of the year and in autumn, when our weather is cool and moisture is abundant, mushrooms will unexpectedly pop up in lawns. Their sudden appearance often causes alarm. I am often asked, “Where do they come from, and do they cause harm?”

Mushrooms, also known as toadstools, are fungi. Although many turf diseases are caused by other fungi, mushrooms cause no harm to the lawn. For the most part, they are generally regarded as a nuisance. Most mushroom fungi are beneficial. They serve in the natural process of decomposition. They break down organic matter in the soil, releasing nutrients necessary for other plant growth.



The visible mushrooms we see growing atop our lawns are the reproductive parts of the fungi plants. They produce millions of microscopic, seed-like bodies called spores. Spores are carried by the wind to other favorable areas in the landscape. When they fall to the ground, they germinate, sending

throughout the soil thread-like structures called hyphae. The hyphae feed on buried wood, fallen leaves, lawn thatch and other organic matter. During this decomposition, nutrients are released into the soil. A single strand of hyphae is too small to see with the human eye; however, when the hyphae grow in the soil, they often group together forming a mass called mycelium. Eventually, the mycelium gives rise to the visible reproductive parts we call mushrooms. Mushroom-producing fungi can live in the soil for years, producing visible mushrooms whenever growing conditions are favorable. It is quite apparent that our recent weather conditions have proven favorable for mushroom production.

Most gardeners are familiar with the highly sought after morel mushroom. It, like some others are edible, but many mushrooms are highly poisonous. Good judgment dictates never to eat a mushroom unless one is absolutely certain it is safe.

Because of this sudden appearance of mushrooms in the lawn, many people want to know how to control them. It is important to remember that these mushrooms are contributing to the natural decomposition of organic matter in the soil, and although somewhat unsightly, these mushrooms are totally harmless to the lawn. I do understand the concern of parents for their children's safety when they are playing in the yard and mushrooms are present. To that, I advise instructing one's children to avoid contacting mushrooms altogether.

Unfortunately, there are no effective chemical controls to eliminate mushrooms. It is better to rely on cultural methods. For example, if excessive thatch is causing the problem, de-thatching the lawn in early spring or fall can help. Sometimes physically removing the mushroom is all that is needed. Keep in mind, the removal of visible mushrooms may cause the lawn to momentarily look better, but the mycelium remains in the soil. More than likely, mushrooms will reappear whenever environmental conditions once again become favorable. If fungi are feeding on dead wood beneath the soil, eventually this food source will be exhausted, and when that happens, the appearance of mushrooms will diminish significantly.

The good news about all this *fungus among us* is— it will likely disappear about as quickly as it appeared. Our rains won't last forever. Soon, hot, dry windy weather will return, and when it does, say goodbye to mushrooms.