

**Yard and Garden – 11-05-2011- Ted Griess / Extension Horticulture Assistant**

As she walked into my office, her hands tightly clutched the little stinker. No, it wasn't a baby with smelly diapers, although that aroma would have been similar. Fortunately, for me, she carried it in a sealed Ziploc bag. She wanted to know its identity. "There is no need to open the bag," I commented. "I know exactly what it is. It's a stinkhorn." As much as these organisms are interesting, they are also incredibly repulsive.



Stinkhorn is the common name for this strange-looking, foul-smelling fungus. Appropriately named, this finger-shaped mushroom tends to grow in cultivated areas. It often appears unexpectedly in mulched flowerbeds, composted soils and even in the middle of one's lawn. It is most common during the summer and fall. This distinctive mushroom has a single, unbranched, erect stalk that is slimy at the tip. Stinkhorn reeks so putridly that one will often smell it before one sees it.

Like many fungi, stinkhorns feed on dead or decaying plant material in the soil. As disgusting as they are, stinkhorns contribute beneficially to the natural decomposition process. Unlike an animal that ingests its food, fungi produce a mass of thread-like material called hyphae that penetrate decaying organic matter in the soil. There they secrete digestive enzymes breaking down the material while, at the same time, releasing nutrients to the soil.

Fungi reproduce by spores. Spores are microscopic, seed-like structures which develop into the above-ground, fruiting body we call the mushroom. With most fungi, the wind disperses the spores insuring the continuation of their life cycle. Such is not the case with stinkhorns. Their method of reproduction is rather bizarre; and yet, in many ways similar to that of flowering plants.

A stinkhorn mushroom develops within an enclosed structure that looks similar to an egg. If cut open, the egg reveals layers of slime. As the mushroom enlarges, the egg eventually breaks open and, within a few hours, grows into the cylindrical-shaped body



attaining a height of four to six inches. At first, the mushroom has no smell, but as it matures, it forms a black, mucus-like mass of slimy spores at its tip which ultimately emits a stomach-turning stench. This nauseating odor attracts flies and other insects. The mucilaginous spores stick to the legs of the insects. Eventually, flies transport the spores when they land on rotting plant material. Thus, the life cycle continues.

Like stinkhorns, most flowering plants emit odors to attract insects for the purpose of reproduction. Fortunately, however, most flowering plants emit a fragrance that is pleasant to sniff. Keep in mind stinkhorns are fungi. They are not green plants; therefore, a standard herbicide such as 2 4-D will not faze them. Physically removing and destroying them is the recommended method of disposal. Wear gloves and hold your nose.

She asked me if stinkhorns were poisonous. "They are not," I told her. Surprisingly, stinkhorns are considered a delicacy in China. I would never consider eating such a disgusting thing. It turned out to be a most interesting conversation. After she left, I personally threw the little stinker out!