

Puffballs

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They are oddly shaped, can smell funny and look like an alien life form arising from the soil. These oddities of nature are puffballs, fungi that appear in late summer and early fall.

Puffballs can range in size from 1 inch across up to 24 inches and weigh up to 10 pounds. They can be lumpy, smooth or spiny, with colors ranging from white to gray to brown. The puffball itself is a spore-producing and dispersal structure. Filled with millions to trillions of spores, release occurs when rainfall, human footsteps and animal activity “puff” the spores into the environment. Wind currents move the spores to new locations and, when conditions are right for spore germination, new fungi develop.

Puffballs are saprobes, meaning they live in an environment abundant in organic matter. They don’t photosynthesize, instead deriving their food and nutrition from decaying materials in the soil. If you have puffballs in your yard, you can be sure that you have something that is degrading, whether it is an old root system from a long-dead tree, a forgotten piece of lumber or an abundance of thatch in the turf.

That puffballs exist in a yard is not grounds for attacking them with an arsenal of products. Ultimately, they are beneficial. Left alone, puffballs will continue to break down organic matter, leaving the soil much richer and healthier for it.

Allergy sufferers and people with asthma should be aware and stay away from puffballs when they are breaking open. If removal is necessary, puffballs can be carefully dug and discarded in the trash. Don’t expect the puffballs to be gone forever, however, because as long as there is decaying organic matter in the soil, puffball fungi can develop.