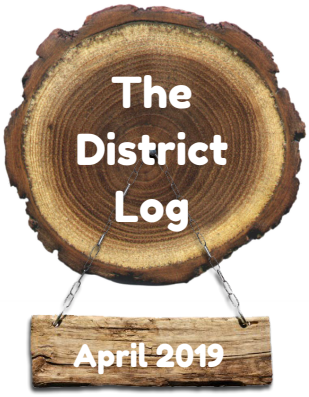
The Fungus Among Us



In Spring the forest comes alive! More than just the plants and animals emerging from the cold of winter, fungi can be found all around the woods. Fungi interact with trees in many ways, some beneficial to the trees and to us, and some that can be dangerous. Spring is a good time to get to know the natural bounty of fungi that call Michigan home.

Other fungi can cause disease in trees, like the infamous Dutch Elm Disease and Oak Wilt. These fungi are not always as visible as the mushrooms we typically think of, but can have a major impact on our forest ecosystems.

Another special type of fungus, called Mycorrhizae, is more beneficial to plants. It bonds with plants and feeds off their excess sugars. In return, the mycorrhizae process nutrients in a way that makes them more readily available to plants and then the plant takes up those modified nutrients. Perhaps most familiar, however, are the fungi that cause rot and decay in wood, many of which produce mushrooms that are edible when cooked. Bricktop, lions mane, blewits, shaggy manes, stumpers, morels, oyster mushrooms, and hen of the woods all fall under this fun category.

Just hearing those names gets the heart of many a Michigander thumping and looking to head to the woods in search of a tasty treat. It can be difficult to find places to forage for any type of edible mushrooms, though, particularly because veteran mushroom pickers tend to be secretive about their favorite spots. The good news is that fungi can be found almost anywhere! The bad news is, only some of them are useful for use by humans. Believe it or not, the biggest part of a fungus is found either underground or in rotting wood, in a sort of root system called Mycelium. Mushrooms are the easily recognizable part of the fungus, and contain its reproductive tissue. The types of mushroom-bearing fungus you can find depend a lot on environmental conditions in the woods. Many fungi only grow best or exclusively on certain species, such as Phoenix Oyster on pines, or Chanterelle in oak forests. Most fungi thrive in areas where there is abundant shade and ample moisture, as well as plenty of organic matter to feed on. Some mushrooms are around for only a short while each year because making and maintaining the spore-producing mushroom takes a lot of energy. Edible mushrooms show up in the Spring, with some fruiting occasionally in the fall. For those who don't want to go far from home, farming your own mushrooms is an option. By taking your fallen trees, and inoculating them with mushroom spawn and providing plenty of shade and water, you can make use of this salvaged wood.

If you're not sure what to be looking for this Spring, there are a few common edibles that you can try and find for yourself! First off is the Honey Mushroom, which, despite its name, is not so sweet to the trees it takes host on. Root-like tendrils spread throughout its host, searching for sugars and nutrients, often killing the tree. It tends to erupt in clumps from the trunk and roots of the host tree, and grows especially well on oak trees.

Another frequently sought-after mushroom is the Morel. This fungus is saprophytic, which means it is only found on dead organic matter. Foragers around the state have their own secret to finding them, but good places to start looking are forests that have recently been burned or harvested. Morels have a lot of literature on how to identify them in the wild, so it makes it easy to make sure you pick something safe.

Finally, Oyster Mushrooms are another saprophytic fungus that can be found commonly in the woods of Barry County. They tend to grow on softer woods like poplar, but can grow on a large amount of hardwood species. Oyster Mushrooms colonize dead wood quickly, and can be flush with mushrooms ready to pick twice a year, if you're lucky. This also makes them good candidates to grow at home. While looking for these mushrooms, it is important to remember to NEVER eat one until you know for sure what it is.

If you want more information on your woods and the fungi within it, the Barry Conservation District has a forester on staff who can help you! The Forestry Assistance Program provides on-site assessments for forest management, to help meet your needs from your woods, at no cost to you. You can call District Forester Ben Savoie at 269-908-4134, email him at ben.savoie@macd.org, or stop in the Barry Conservation District office at 1611 South Hanover Street, Hastings, MI, Suite 105.

This month by the numbers:

11 Site visits - 424 acres
12 Referrals, 754 acres
3 outreach event
1 newspaper article

Open referrals:

03-19-15
19-acre woodlot near residential area in NE Allegan county Pursuing timber harvest for enhancing recreational and wildlife values, while protecting water quality and aesthetics of the woods. Looking to harvest trees on North side of the Rabbit River, as well as the oaks on the high ground of the southern portion of the parcel, and thinning the woods to the south of the Rabbit River. Contact Shara Funk- 269.792.0124 or shara.funk@yahoo.com

08-19-11
High quality oak trees in upland hardwood forest in southern Barry County, 35 acres of woods. Pursuing timber harvest, but is wary of oak wilt, as well as impacts of harvest on the hilly landscape. No commercial harvest has taken place since the 70s. Possibly interested in management plan for tree farm certification. Call Ben at (269) 908-4134 if interested.