

These Fungi Maybe Smelly, but They're Harmless



Photo by David W. Marshall, UF-IFAS Leon County Extension: During wet summer weather, slime molds of various colors can flow out of the soil onto grass or other plants. The fungus is a harmless decomposer of dead wood or other organic matter.

Photo by L.H. Rhodes, Ohio State University Extension: Stinkhorn fungi, decomposers of dead wood, are commonly found in landscape beds mulched with hardwood chips.

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Unusual fungi appear in north Florida landscapes and gardens during wet periods.

These saprophytic fungi, as they are called, include a large number of the specialized fungi that aid in the decomposition of organic materials. They inhabit the soil naturally and break down dead plant and animal matter to more simple forms.

These fungi are mostly beneficial organisms, providing some of the most basic biological functions. Imagine if dead plants and animals didn't decompose and add organic matter back to the soil. It is doubtful that we would even be here without them, but if we were, we would be pretty deep in dead stuff!

Most of the time the saprophytic fungi go quietly about their business, but they can sometimes cause alarm among gardeners and homeowners. When environmental conditions are just right, they go into a reproductive stage forming mushrooms, puffballs, and similar structures of different sizes and colors.

One such species produces orange mushrooms with the odor of rotting meat. Known as stinkhorn or buzzard's beak, this fungus is a good decomposer of dead woody tissue. In landscape plantings, it most commonly occurs in beds that have been mulched with hardwood chips.

The fairy ring fungus is so named because it forms white mushrooms in a perfect circle. This saprophyte begins at a single point, such as on a buried piece of wood or stump. Once that is decomposed it begins moving outward feeding upon dead grass roots, thatch, clippings and other organic materials. Most of the fungus remains underground in small strands known as hyphae and might not form mushrooms for many years. When conditions for mushroom development occurs, the mushrooms appear all at the same time. In most cases fairy rings are only a few feet in diameter, but there are cases where they are known to be many miles across.

These Fungi Maybe Smelly

The slime molds, another group of saprophytic fungi, produce interesting, and some might say, revolting structures. There are slimy ones and those species that have the consistency of egg whites. Some can actually move by a flowing motion. They are commonly found growing on the surface of dead wood, mulch, and even in the lawn in extremely warm, wet areas. They may be gray, yellow, white, or other colors.

Gardeners should accept these saprophytic fungi as an important part of our natural environment. They are rarely associated with diseases of living plants. Occasionally they can be a nuisance, but the above ground parts that you see, such as mushrooms, rarely last for very long.

There are exceptions. I recently examined a tennis court where mushrooms were lifting and breaking through the surface. Our University of Florida mycologist explained to me that this was not a rare occurrence. Evidently dead tree roots or a similar source of food for the fungus was left in the soil during construction. He noted that he had seen cases where mushrooms had pushed their way through parking lots and airport runways.

Question of the Week: What is the best time of year to prune Oleanders?

Answer: Oleanders are summer flowering shrubs, forming flower buds and blossoms on new growth throughout the growing season. Any heavy pruning that is required should be done in late winter just before the first flush of spring growth emerges. In coastal areas they can be safely pruned in late February. Light pruning to shape plants and remove old, faded flower clusters can be done throughout the spring and summer.

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