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# Here's What You'll Need to Start Foraging Mushrooms

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As a recent transplant to the Pacific Northwest, I've enthusiastically taken advantage of everything the area has to offer, from hiking Cascade Mountain peaks to sampling Central Oregon's wealth of incredible breweries. But the new hobby I've fallen hardest for is mushroom foraging. The east side of the Cascades enjoys vibrant spring and fall seasons, when I can—with just a little effort, and some clues from more experienced friends—find beautiful specimens of morel, porcini, chanterelle, and even matsutake mushrooms.

The Pacific Northwest isn't the only place where you can make these delicious finds: Choice culinary mushrooms are native to the American Midwest, the Rockies, and the Northeast, plus much of Canada. Some species, such as morels and oyster mushrooms, can even be found deep in the South.

I love hunting for mushrooms not just because I love eating them—although I do, I really, really do—but also because foraging keeps my mind and body active, allows me to immerse myself in the outdoors, and continually teaches me new things about the natural world. It's such a relaxing and rewarding hobby that I know several people who are allergic to mushrooms but still forage just as much as I do. It's also, conveniently, a naturally socially distant activity ideal for our current moment.

You don't need much in the way of equipment to find and pick mushrooms, but there are a few key items and resources that will help you find what you're looking for as well as keep you safe, from both accidentally poisoning yourself and getting lost in unfamiliar terrain.

## Step one: Get educated

The biggest fear people have when they start hunting mushrooms is meeting an unfortunate end by sampling the wrong species, and that anxiety is well founded. A popular aphorism among mushroom hunters is, "You can eat any mushroom ... once." Another goes, "There are old mushroom hunters, and there are bold mushroom hunters, but there are no old, bold mushroom hunters."

Though mushroom-related deaths are relatively rare—[around three per year](#) in the United States, according to the National Poison Data System—many more people each year (closer to 7,500) experience everything from mild nausea to liver failure due to either eating the wrong species or failing to prepare wild mushrooms correctly. Some mushrooms (such as the [fabled "death cap"](#)) are straight-up deadly. Others [will make you sick](#) but probably won't kill you. And some that are generally considered safe to eat still need to be thoroughly cooked to destroy naturally occurring, nonlethal toxins. This is one reason why, generally speaking, [you should never eat wild mushrooms raw](#)—even ones said to be edible. Another is that cooking [makes mushrooms more digestible to humans](#) and unlocks their considerable nutritional value.

The one cardinal rule in mushroom hunting is: If in doubt, throw it out. Luckily for aspiring foragers, however, the choicest edible mushrooms are hard to mistake for anything else. Morels, with their distinctive brain-like appearance, can only possibly be confused with false morels, which [don't really look that much like the real thing](#) upon close inspection. Likewise, there are false chanterelles, but the [fake ones have gills rather than the characteristic ridges](#) that you'll find on the underside of true chanterelles. [Matsutakes](#) are among the most difficult to identify by sight alone, but their distinct smell—often described as "cinnamon and gym socks"—is a clear giveaway.

The best way to avoid poisoning is to get familiar with the characteristics of the specific mushrooms you're looking for, learn when and where they're available, and ignore everything else. And the best way to do that is to get a good mushroom-identification book. These books detail individual species' habitats and growing seasons, their look (including [spore prints](#)) and smell, and their edibility or toxicity.

## Get this:

- **A region-specific mushroom guide:** Ideally you want to get a guidebook that caters to your geographical region, since the distribution of mushroom species varies from place to place. For people like me, in the Pacific Northwest, the gold standard is David Arora's [All That the Rain Promises and More: A Hip Pocket Guide to Western Mushrooms](#). (Just don't ask me why Dave is wearing a tux and holding a trombone in the cover photo.) Similar books exist for the [Northeast](#), the [Southeast](#), and the [Midwest](#), among other specific subregions.

- **A mushroom key:** It's also a great idea to carry a [single-page mushroom-identification chart](#) (PDF) so you can get a ballpark idea of unfamiliar mushrooms while you're in the field. I laminated mine so I can carry it in all conditions.

## Nice to have:

- **A general primer on mushrooms:** A book that provides a broader, less region-specific overview of mushrooms—such as Arora's [Mushrooms Demystified](#), or Gary Lincoff's [The Complete Mushroom Hunter: An Illustrated Guide to Finding, Harvesting, and Enjoying Wild Mushrooms](#)—would be a great addition to your library, especially if you like to forage while traveling.

- **A mushroom-identification app:** Since they have the potential to kill you (or at least lead to a rough night in the bathroom), it's not a good idea to leave the decision of whether to eat mushrooms to an identification app. Still, they can be useful when you just want a general idea of what the heck you're looking at. My favorite app is [iNatu-ralist](#), which not only helps you ID mushrooms but also lets you catalog where you found them so you can return year after year. You can also use the app to see where others have found specific species, which can be really handy when you're first getting started hunting.

But even if you're sure you've harvested a species that's "[generally regarded as safe](#)," you should stay on your toes—at least the first time you try it.

Even mushrooms that are free of toxins can sometimes be contaminated with pesticides and other chemicals used by road crews, landscapers, and farming operations, warns Sister Marie Kopin, C.P.P.S., chair of the education committee at the [North American Mycological Association \(NAMA\)](#). Some people may have adverse reactions to these chemicals, or experience environmental allergies (or previously unknown [mushroom allergies](#)) that they mistake for mushroom poisoning.

If you're eating a foraged species for the first time, or if you've found a familiar species in an unfamiliar area, Kopin recommends thoroughly cooking and sampling a small piece—ideally under the supervision of another adult—to make sure you don't experience stomach upset or other issues. If a day or two passes and you still feel fine, it should be okay for you to incorporate them into your diet.

## Step two: Find and pick mushrooms

Once you know what you're looking for, it's time to actually go out into the wild and find it. To do that, you'll need a few things. Thankfully, mushroom-hunting gear is generally pretty basic, inexpensive stuff.

## Get this:

- **A basket or a mesh bag:** Part of being a good mushroom hunter is ensuring that there will be mushrooms to hunt next season. Though there's [vigorous debate](#) over their efficacy, many believe that using a wicker picnic-style basket or a mesh bag (a [laundry](#) or [reusable produce](#) bag works great here) ensures that spores can fall from the mushrooms you've picked and repopulate the forest floor.

- **A pocket knife:** You need a knife to clean up the stems of mushrooms you pick, cut them to check for worms, and in some cases cleanly extract them from the ground. (Again, there's lots of debate over whether it's better to cut mushrooms or to pluck them, but the evidence indicates that plucking most species [doesn't damage](#) the underground [mycelium](#), and picked mushrooms will drop spores whether they're cut or pulled.) Any old knife will do for this purpose—in fact, I used a kitchen paring knife on my last outing—but a [folding pocket knife](#) or a [retractable-blade utility knife](#) is best, if only because you're less likely to accidentally stab yourself with the exposed blade. NAMA president Barbara Ching prefers the folding [Opinel No.08 Stainless Steel Mushroom Knife](#), which has a built-in brush and a curved blade that more easily gets at mushroom stems. (Tip: Attach some [fluorescent flagging tape](#) to your knife so it's more visible if you drop it in the grass or pine duff.)

- **A brush:** It's a good idea to carry a brush to clean the tops and gills, ridges, or pores of your mushrooms after you've picked them. The less dirt that goes into your basket or bag, the less you'll have to clean off your mushrooms later. A [good paint brush](#) works well for broad strokes, and it's not a bad idea to carry a soft-bristle toothbrush for detail work. (Again, don't forget to wrap some flagging tape around the handle!)

- **A topographic map:** Specific mushroom species like to grow at specific elevations at different times of the year, as temperature and humidity conditions have to be just right for ideal growth. Carrying a topographic map means you can always tell whether you're in the right zone—once you know how high you need to go, anyway. Google Maps has a topographic layer available, but getting the signal you need to use it can be a challenge when you're out in the woods. Luckily, the U.S. Forest Service makes [printing PDF files of topographic maps](#) available for free online (using U.S. Geological Survey data), so if you know where you're going to hunt, print them out before you leave the house.

- **A permit (where necessary):** If you're hunting on government land—and especially U.S. Forest Service land—chances are you'll need a permit. These permits are usually free for noncommercial use and will allow you to collect a sizable load of mushrooms each day. (For example, when hunting in the [Deschutes National Forest](#), I'm allowed 2 gallons of mushrooms per day for 10 days per calendar year.) Depending on where you live, certain rare or highly sought-after mushrooms may require a special permit (as matsutakes do here in the Pacific Northwest.) Forest Service ranger stations will provide you with maps highlighting which areas are okay for picking, as well.

- **Water and snacks:** When you're trekking up and down mountainsides, you need to keep up your appetite. And the unlikely scenario that something unfortunate happens and you're stranded out in the wilderness waiting for rescue, it's a good idea to have a [water bottle](#) handy. Personally, I like to bring along a couple of seeds, nuts, dried fruit, jerky, and protein bars, along with a couple [Nalgene bottles](#) full of water (plus another bottle for my dog).

## Nice to have:

- **An off-line GPS device:** If you're heading deep into the woods—especially woods you don't know well—it's a good idea to take an off-line GPS device along so you can be sure you'll find your way out.



Top, Morel mushrooms (*Morchella*) come in more than 80 species, with black, gray, and blonde varieties. Second, Spring king mushrooms (*Boletus rex-veris*), a species of porcini mushrooms, pop up in May and June in the Cascade Mountains. Third, the first blonde morel (*Morchella americana*) the author ever found. Fourth, my everyday carry for mushroom hunting includes a water bottle, dog and human treats, a basket, a mesh bag, a paint brush, a pocket knife, DEET-free bug spray, a mushroom-foraging map, and, of course, my phone. Fifth, dehydrated mushrooms, such as the porcinis (left) and morels (right) seen here, can be reconstituted and used in soups, stir-fries, and risottos, or ground into powder and used as a delicious seasoning. Photos: Ben Keough

You can use an off-line maps app on your smartphone: I use [Google Maps's off-line function](#), and Wirecutter senior editor Christine Ryan suggests [Gaia GPS](#) (which requires a subscription for off-line maps). [AllTrails](#) is another popular option (it's also subscription based). But even the best phone batteries will run out pretty quickly, so backpackers and the very safety-conscious might want to invest in a longer-lasting [handheld hiking GPS](#).

- **Walkie-talkies:** If you hunt with friends and want to cover a lot of ground, it's a good idea to bring a set of [walkie-talkies](#) with you so you can stay in touch and keep from getting lost or separated from the group. For a lower-tech option, a [simple whistle](#) works well if you don't go too far afield.

- **Bright clothing:** This is both a safety measure and a way to help you stay visible to foraging buddies in dense forest. Why safety? If you have an accident in the woods, you'll be a lot easier to spot in a neon-pink T-shirt or parka than you would be in a black one. Who knows? It could be the difference between life and death.

- **Bug spray:** In many parts of North America, prime springtime mushroom season coincides with mosquito and tick season. Unless you enjoy getting eaten up, it's probably a good idea to pack a can of [DEET-free bug repellent](#) before you head out.

- **A small garden trowel:** Harvesting a complete specimen from the ground makes it easier to identify many species—specifically Boletes and Amanitas—and a knife can sometimes damage the base, said Ching. For that reason, it's helpful to carry a small trowel or a hand weeder to extract the whole mushroom.

- **Friends (and/or a dog):** You can forage solo, but it's better with friends—human and canine alike. Not only can more people find more mushrooms than one person, but they can also give you second opinions on species identification and help carry you out of the woods in case something unfortunate happens. And aside from being just the absolute best, a well-trained dog companion can help protect you from dangerous wildlife and lowlifes.

## Step three: Use or preserve your mushrooms

Depending on what kind of mushrooms you pick and how much you're able to harvest, you may end up with way more than you can reasonably use before they go bad.

While they're fresh, you can use edible mushrooms in [pasta](#) and [soups](#), and many are delicious [grilled](#) or [fried](#). Almost all edible mushrooms taste amazing [sautéed with butter and either garlic or shallots](#). But it bears repeating: Cook mushrooms thoroughly before eating, and never eat them raw. Consult your guidebook for cooking tips specific to each species.

If you don't think you'll get to your fresh mushrooms in time, here's what I recommend having at the ready.

## Get this:

- **A food dehydrator:** There are a variety of ways to preserve mushrooms, and certain methods work best with certain species: [Sautéing and freezing](#), [pickling](#), and [canning \(video\)](#) are all options for chanterelles, for instance. But drying is the closest there is to a universal solution, and it can actually improve (or at least concentrate) the flavor and aroma of some mushrooms. Most mushrooms rehydrate well for use in soups and pasta, and dried mushrooms can also be ground into powder and used as a seasoning. (I've made this recipe and can vouch for it.) And the best, fastest way to dry mushrooms is with a [good food dehydrator](#) such as our top pick, the [Nesco FD-1018A Gardenmaster Dehydrator](#).

## Nice to have:

- **A vacuum sealer:** Dried mushrooms will keep well in a jar or a plastic bag, but protecting them from oxygen with a [vacuum sealer](#), such as the [Nesco American Harvest Vx-12 Vacuum Sealer](#) we recommend, can extend their shelf life even further. Just bear in mind that unless your slices are pretty thick, they might get crushed during the vacuum process. (One way to prevent this is to vacuum seal them in mason jars, using either an attachment for a sealer like the Nesco or a [chamber vacuum sealer](#).)

## Step four: Learn more, and give back

If you live in an area where choice mushrooms grow, chances are good that there's an active mushroom club you can join. You can find a list of local clubs through the [NAMA website](#). These clubs are full of people of all experience levels who are more than happy to help newbies get acquainted with the hobby and avoid bad outcomes. They often host foraging expeditions (led by veteran foragers), as well as talks by biologists, medical professionals, chefs, and authors of mushroom books. There are few better resources out there.

In addition to joining a club, it's a good idea to make yourself cozy on one or two online forums dedicated to mushroom foraging. The [r/mycology](#) subreddit is a good place to ogle people's finds and request photo ID of unusual mushrooms. You'll probably also be able to find an identification or discussion group specific to your state or region on Facebook.

Just be aware that while people in these clubs and forums might be full of advice and happy to help you avoid mistakes, that doesn't mean they're going to give away the locations of their favorite hunting grounds. It takes years to find "honeypots" where choice mushrooms return year after year, and they tend to be tightly guarded secrets. If someone refuses to tell you where they found their bounty, don't be offended—often, they'll happily provide you with a general area, an elevation, or tips on which indicator plants to look for. (Specific species of mushrooms like to grow under specific trees or bushes, and often pop up in proximity to other telltale mushrooms or plants.)

At that point, it's up to you to explore. After all, half the fun is the thrill of the chase. If you do the necessary research and equip yourself with the right tools, you can become a proficient mushroom forager in just one or two seasons, bringing home enough delicious edibles to feed a whole family plus some lucky neighbors. Trust me, I speak from experience.