

FUNGI IN CHURCHYARDS AND BURIAL GROUNDS

In days gone by, fungi were a puzzle. As toadstools appeared overnight they were taken to be the work of “dark powers”. It wasn’t until the 18th century and the development of the microscope that the mystery was solved. The mushrooms or toadstools were packed with tiny spores – seed of the fungus.

Think of the fungi like an apple tree. The toadstools we see in autumn are fruit – just like apples. The actively growing fungus – equivalent to trunk and branches – is hidden within the ground. Just because something is largely unseen doesn’t mean that it is unimportant. Fungi play a range of roles within nature, and without them we would be totally lost.

A fungi is entirely made up of minute, hair-like filaments called hyphae, which develop into a fine mesh net growing through the material from which they take their nutrition. This is called the mycelium. To produce the fruiting body, which is visible, two mycelia of the same species band together and if the conditions are suitable then the fruit body or toadstool will appear.

Fungi and trees

This is the most amazing and complex relationship. Trees as we know them simply wouldn’t exist without fungi. Fungi live in and around tree roots helping to absorb water and nutrients from the soil. They live inside the tree protecting against invasion from harmful pathogens. They decompose dead wood and leaves, recycling nutrients. They kill off stressed and weakened trees creating space for a new generation to thrive.

The ancient yews, found in many churchyards, are hollowed out by the action of fungi. This was once thought to make the tree in imminent danger of collapse, but it is known to be a survival mechanism. Hollowing actually makes the tree stronger and longer lived. Of the several species of fungi which grow on yew trees the most colourful is the bright yellow bracket fungus, commonly known as “chicken of the woods”.

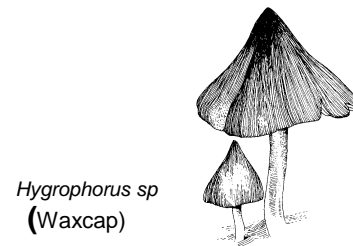
Fungi and grasslands

Grasslands, which are “unimproved” such as on old commons and old churchyards support their own unique fungi and most are decomposers and recyclers. They break down the mass of dead vegetation, returning its nutrients to the soil. Sites rich in grassland fungi are now rare in Britain, although the pink waxcap,

a grassland species, may be more common here than anywhere else in the world. Old churchyards may be

the last refuge for grassland fungi in some areas in Britain, which is why it is important to conserve these species.

In autumn, churchyards become festooned with fungi. Many are brightly coloured and greasy to the touch. These are waxcaps, a striking group of fungi for which churchyards have become rightly famous. Other distinctive grassland fungi include fairy clubs, earth’s tongues, puffballs and fairy rings.



Identifying fungi

There are thousands of species of fungi and many look identical until examined under a microscope. Most don’t have common English names, so don’t worry if you can’t name them; just admire their beauty and mystery. A further fungus other than the pink waxcap, with a common name and often found in churchyards, is the weeping widow (*lacrymaria lacrymabunda*). This fungus appears to weep from its cap, catching the black spores so that it looks like a widow’s veil.

Guidelines for conservation

- Don’t be too tidy
- Don’t cut off and clear dead wood from trees unnecessarily unless there is a H&S issue.
- Keep grassland areas which are good for fungi short and well mown (apart from when the fruiting bodies are visible in autumn)
- Reduce mowing to support flowers in areas less important for fungi
- Do not reseed old grassland
- Do not use chemicals

FAQ's

Will the fungi kill the trees? Will it kill me? What does it taste like?

If you want to know the answers then go on a fungus foray. Every year somewhere near you will be an expert leading a foray. Ask your local county wildlife trust or organise one of your own in the local churchyard.

Fungi are all around us, but we seldom see them. They are a crucial part of any churchyard habitat. They help to maintain a healthy system where wildlife can thrive. In short, they are caring for God's acre.

Contacts

British Mycological Society

The Wolfson Wing,
Jodrell Laboratory,
Royal Botanic Gardens,
Kew, Surrey
Email: admin@britmycolsoc.info
www.britmycolsoc.org.uk

County Wildlife Trusts

They provide information on fungus groups in your local area.

For details of your local Wildlife Trust contact The Wildlife Trusts
The Kiln
Waterside
Mather Road,
Newark
Nottinghamshire NG24 1WT
Email: enquiry@wildlifetrusts.org
Tel: 01636 677711

Publications

Journals and resources of the British Mycological Society might have additional sources of reference as they have articles and photographs of unusual finds.

An easy to follow basic guide is Collins Nature Guide, *Mushrooms and Toadstools of Britain and Europe* by Edmund Garnweider ISBN 0 – 00 21994-7 or *Collins Complete British Mushrooms and Toadstools: The Essential Photograph Guide to Britain's Fungi* (Collins Complete Guides) by Paul Sterry and Barry Hughes. ISBN 13: 9780007232246 ISBN 10: 0007232241

FSC (Field Studies Council) leaflet *Fungi name Trail* by Holden and Hamper
www.field-studies-council.org

Countryside Council for Wales

Leaflet available, *Fungi – Introducing a forgotten kingdom*
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