grow your own

Gourmet Mushrooms

Homegrown mushrooms bring a richer flavor to the kitchen than their store-bought kin.

BY CAROLE OTTESEN

Oyster mushrooms like this one are prized for their tasty, meaty, shell-like caps.
N O T V E R Y long ago, the white button mushroom reigned supreme as the most trusted and recognizable edible mushroom in American kitchens. Today, gourmet species—formerly considered rare and exot- ic—shiitake, enoki, oysters—are offered side by side with the white buttons in supermarkets across the country.

Cooking shows and foodie magazines have fueled the demand for these gourmet mushrooms with their recipes. Those who cook with them soon learn that they are deli- ciously habit-forming—and also expensive. One way to enjoy and afford gourmet mushrooms is to grow your own. Besides being economical, cultivating a known species of mushroom reduces the danger inherent in collecting: possibly misidentifying and ingesting poisonous mushrooms. Neither plant nor animal, mushrooms belong to their own kingdom (Fungi). They are actually more closely related to animals than to plants, so, not surprisingly, culti- vating them is a bit different from growing, say, tomatoes or radishes. It entails starting with safe and certified spawn (a term for mushroom spawn that Smith doled out at an approximate ratio of one pound of spawn per quarter bale of straw).

To get a feel for mushroom cultivation, Mike Smith, a retired ichthyologist in Sil- ver Spring, Maryland, is a mushroom afi- cionado who cultivates them indoors and out. At one of his mushroom-cultivating parties, he showed me and his other guests how to use three-foot-long, clear polypro- pylene plastic bags to make our own kits. We filled the bags with layers of packed-down straw, still damp from having been steam sterilized. We alternated the straw with mushroom spawn that Smith doled out at an approximate ratio of one pound of spawn per quarter bale of straw.

Some edible mushrooms such as golden chan- terelle, top, and enoki, bottom, need exacting conditions so can be challenging to cultivate. While it's best to start with a commercial mush- room kit, it's possible to make your own. Mike Smith, a retired ichthyologist in Sil- ver Spring, Maryland, is a mushroom afi- cionado who cultivates them indoors and out. At one of his mushroom-cultivating parties, he showed me and his other guests how to use three-foot-long, clear polypropylene plastic bags to make our own kits. We filled the bags with layers of packed-down straw, still damp from having been steam sterilized. We alternated the straw with mushroom spawn that Smith doled out at an approximate ratio of one pound of spawn per quarter bale of straw.

We poked a few holes in our bags, and voila! Ten days later, a beautiful, bountiful crop of pinkish-white oyster mush- rooms popped out of the holes. Unfortunately, the number of mush- rooms a kit will produce is limited. The mycelia stop producing mushrooms when the food in the kit is exhausted. This may occur after only one or two flushes. At that point, you can add the straw to your compost pile or use it to start an outdoor mushroom patch.

To use a freshly cut log for mushroom growing, it must first be drilled with holes to introduce spawn.

Shiitake mushrooms take several months to appear from spawn implanted in a log.
grow and fruit. For example, pearl oysters, which are one of the quickest and easiest mushrooms to cultivate, are tropical and will die if exposed to freezing temperatures.

Mushrooms from temperate climates typically flush in spring and/or fall and stop producing in hot or very cold weather. This means that although you cannot provide as steady a supply of gourmet mushrooms as the supermarkets, the seasonal flushes of a mushroom such as shiitake offer superior flavor. A shiitake that has spent a week under cellophane can’t compete with the earthy taste of one that has been harvested minutes earlier from your very own log.

Above all, mushrooms require moisture. A location shaded from the desiccating sun is ideal for most species, though a few—like oyster mushrooms—can tolerate the occasional sunbeam as long as their growing material is kept moist. Winecaps have even been known to thrive in vegetable gardens between rows of chard or strawberries.

What will keep all mushrooms producing is an ample supply of their preferred food. However, don’t be surprised if the mycelia spread out underground and find their own nutrients, sending up mushrooms where you least expect to find them.

Whether you try growing your own edible mushrooms inside or out, you will be well rewarded as long as you provide what they need. Start with one of the easy kinds to grow such as oysters. As you get the hang of it, you may find yourself experimenting with more challenging species. Fortunately, a wealth of workshops and books about cultivating all kinds of mushrooms are popping up like... well, you know.

Carole Ottesen is a contributing writer for The American Gardener.