

# The Outside Story



## Hunting Mushrooms: The Old Not Bold Approach By: Carolyn Lorié

When you stumble across something purple in the forest, it's hard not to stop in your tracks. At least it was for me on a recent hike in Thetford, when I came across three purple mushrooms. They stood about four inches tall, with saucer tops that were nearly black in the center and ringed in a rich eggplant-purple. I was captivated. I was also clueless, as I had no idea what I was looking at. I have long regarded mushrooms the way I do yellow-colored warblers and ferns – far too many and too confusing to distinguish one from another.

But this tiny stand of purple mushrooms was too, well, too purple, to pass by. I had to know what they were. Instead of taking them, I did my best to remember what they looked like and as soon as I got home, I searched online. There were pages of images and descriptions of purple mushrooms, but ultimately I came up empty.

Therein lies the problem for the novice mushroom hunter: it's hard to know which are the distinguishing characteristics of a particular mushroom, and how to narrow your search. While the internet is a treasure trove of information, it's also a maze of misinformation. So I put away the laptop and sought out more reliable resources: a detailed field guide and knowledgeable friends.

I chose a field guide put out by the National Audubon Society, in part because the photos were exquisite. The day I got it, I perused the pages and was struck by just how much there is to know. There are mushrooms with attached gills and those with unattached gills; caps can be convex, conical, flat, knobbed, bell shaped or sunken; the caps may be dry, moist, or sticky; their surfaces may have raised scales, flat scales, patches, or be smooth as silk. I had no idea where to start.

My friend, Cynthia Huntington, a poet and professor of creative writing at Dartmouth College, faced this very problem more than 20 years ago, when she started gathering mushrooms. She let an old adage be her guide: There are old mushroom hunters, and there are bold

mushroom hunters. But there are no old, bold mushroom hunters.

She learned to identify one type of mushroom and only one: boletes. These mushrooms, belonging to the Boletaceae family, have thick stems and caps with pores (not gills) on the underside. "With really, really rare exceptions they are not poisonous, and the ones that are, can be easily distinguished," she told me. Boletes also happen to be widespread. Since moving to Thetford a decade ago, Cynthia has broadened her horizons and now collects and eats an impressive array of mushrooms. But she is by no means a bold mushroom hunter. "I just learn one at a time," she said.

Mark Kutolowski, a wilderness guide and expert forager, gave me similar advice. He told me that when he first learned to identify edible wild plants, he started with just two: Japanese knotweed and cattails. He encouraged me to learn to identify two or three mushrooms at most, but to make my knowledge of them comprehensive: What time of year do they appear, under what conditions and in what habitat? Can they be used to cook, or for medicine, or for tea?

He also suggested I not rely solely on the field guide. "The best way to learn a new species is to go with someone who knows."

I have taken Mark and Cynthia's advice to heart and am proceeding with small steps and a narrow focus. I have learned a few things, including that spring and fall tend to be the best time to find mushrooms in our area, that examining all the parts –

cap, gills, stalk – will help with identification, and that, for now, I have no intention of eating anything I find.

My interest in learning to identify mushrooms was never culinary anyway. The more time I spend walking the woods, trails, and fields of Vermont and New Hampshire, the more I want to know. Mark told me that, as he learned to read the landscape and interact with it, his love and appreciation for it deepened. I get it.

Recently, I was on another walk in the woods when my eye again caught a small splotch of purple on the ground. It was a single mushroom, its cap, stalk and gills identical to the ones that stopped me in my tracks some weeks ago. The only difference was that this time, thanks to Cynthia and the field guide, I knew it was a *Russula mariae*, commonly known as purple-bloom russula.

*A gallery exhibit featuring Outside Story illustrations and articles is open through November 29 at the Montshire Museum in Norwich, VT. Carolyn Lorié lives with her rescue dog and very large cat in Thetford, Vermont. The illustration for this column was drawn by Adelaide Tyrol. The Outside Story is assigned and edited by Northern Woodlands magazine and sponsored by the Wellborn Ecology Fund of New Hampshire Charitable Foundation: [wellborn@nhcf.org](mailto:wellborn@nhcf.org)*

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