

BOTANY
NATURE RAMBLINGS
by Frank Thome



Toadstool Is Mushroom

► BRIGHT flowers and uncurling fern leaves are not the only spring offerings of woods and fields. A lower order of plants, the fleshy fungi, puts in its sudden and puckerish appearances, popping up from the damp leaf-mold and out of the moist sod after every night of rain. They challenge us to gather and cook and eat, and at the

same time warn of toxic tummy-aches, if not worse.

How to tell the good from the bad, in this group of plants, is a practical and perennial spring problem. Every person with any local reputation for a knowledge of nature lore is certain to be asked, many times, "How can I tell mushrooms from toadstools?"

The answer is easy. If it has a more or less round cap and a supporting stalk it is a mushroom. It is also a toadstool. The words are synonyms; either designates a fungus of that description.

Such an answer, however, is bound to leave the questioner unsatisfied. To him, "mushroom" means a fleshy fungus that is good to eat; "toadstool" one that is poisonous. Learning that he has been under a misapprehension regarding the actual meaning of the words only adds to his confusion, and certainly does not solve his problem. What he wants to know is: Can I, or can't I, safely eat this thing?

Unfortunately, there is no safe rule-of-thumb for distinguishing between edible and poisonous mushrooms—or toadstools. Poisonous species do not turn silver spoons black. Whether the skin of the cap peels off easily or not is no criterion. Nor is a black underside of the cap a sign of danger; indeed, the common mushroom offered for sale on the market is black underneath, and the deadliest of all mushrooms, the amanitas, are innocently white! You just have to learn your mushrooms, species by species—or get acquainted with a competent botanist.

It is easy, however, to identify the amanitas, which are at once the commonest and most dangerous of all the poisonous mushrooms. If the stalk arises out of a cup at the base, and is encircled with a loose ring of fungus tissue, then it is an amanita, and should be shunned. Some other mushrooms have cup only, or ring only; amanitas have both.

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