

Erin Fletcher The Star

The next time you got out for a walk in the woods, look down. You may be stepping on a great meal.

Vancouver Island is home to more than 2,000 mushroom species and many of the more common ones are delicious sauteed in butter and garlic.

But when it comes to mushroom hunting, the challenge is not in the hunt but in knowing which ones are edible and which ones will give your intestines a terrible turn.

Last week a group of eager mushroom hunters gathered at Wildwood, a Land Conservancy forest in Yellowpoint, to learn how to identify and cook the delicate fungus we are all so fond of. Rob Countess, owner of Vancouver Island Nature Exploration, an eco-tourism company based out of Port Hardy, hosted the one-day workshop.

Countess, a biologist, did his masters thesis on Vancouver Island mushrooms. He said the majority of Vancouver Island species have not yet been catalogued, studied or classified according to edibility.

"For a lot of them edibility is unknown," said Jay Rastogi, manager of Wildwood and an amateur mushroom hunter who also attended the workshop.

"There is no rule of thumb that will tell you whether a particular mushroom is edible or not."

Countess advised hunters to look for features like gill shape, colour, odour and staining ability to identify the mushroom in a guide. Chanterelle, hedgehog, blurette, conifer tuft and lobster mushrooms are some of the most common edible mushrooms found in the Nanaimo area.

"Most species are not deadly poisonous," said Rastogi.

And those that aren't edible cause different symptoms. While one may give you gas, another may cause your entire body to relax to death.

Rastogi has taken the course many times and says it is a good "refresher" for him. When he started mushroom hunting he knew three varieties. Now he knows nearly 30.

Aside from knowing what kind of mushrooms to look for, you should also keep your wits about you when on the hunt, said Rastogi.

"When your out hunting you are looking down a lot and you zig zag and can get lost very easily. Safety is the biggest thing to be aware of. Also know 100 per cent what species you are picking and eating."

Rastogi always consults a mushroom guide and often a fellow mushroom hunter to confirm his findings before eating what he's found.

Despite the rain, participants in this year's workshop were eager to hunt, spending nearly two hours with their heads down searching along tree trunks, in rotted tree stumps and in mossy nooks around Wildwood.

"I just loved it," said Yellowpoint resident Peggy McDonald of the workshop.

"We have a lot of mushrooms around our place and I have tried some but we are trying to expand our list a little bit."

"I never realized how many you could eat," said Marc Couturier, a Nanaimo resident who hasn't dabbled much in mushroom hunting. Couturier has noticed a lot of mushrooms growing around his property but didn't know which were edible. He brought samples and photographs to the workshop to become better acquainted with what he has.

The Land Conservancy hosts several mushroom workshops throughout the year. The fall course focuses on gathering and the spring on propagation.

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