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Mushroom show displays fungus to raise funds for Arboretum

By Betsy Clayton
Emerald Reporter

The difference between a McDonald's hamburger and fillet mignon is sharp. But the difference between a store-bought mushroom and a Chanterelle mushroom is even sharper.

This is how David Wagner, a higher plant botanist at the University, explains why he gathers mushrooms as a hobby. The sixth annual Fall Festival

and Mushroom Show at Mount Pisgah Arboretum on Sunday gave people with hobbies like Wagner's a chance to look at about 100 different kinds of mushrooms, gather information and help raise money for the arboretum.

Long tables displayed mushrooms of all shapes, sizes and colors with cards listing scientific and common names, edibility, lifestyle, habitats and distinguishing characteristics. Other attractions included plant sales, guided arboretum walking tours, books, food booths and fresh-pressed cider.

Wagner, who is on the arboretum's board of directors, said more than 1,000 people were expected to come to the festival. "It was announced in Sunset Magazine. We have people who come from Portland to Roseburg," he said.

According to Wagner, the goal of the festival is to educate people about mushrooms and to provide aesthetic enjoyment. "Like going to an art gallery, it's the same thing here. Also it introduces people to the arboretum," he said.

This year the number of mushrooms on display is low due to the lack of rain. Rowe Freeman, a volunteer at the arboretum who teaches classes on mushrooms at Lane Community College, said the mushroom supply is much smaller than ordinary. "Last year we had 256 different kinds of mushrooms. This year we'll do well if we get half of that," he explained.

The festival is held at the end of October because it's during the rainy season. Wagner said that the effects of a dry year like this may last more than one season.

The Mount Pisgah Arboretum is funded by private donations and receives no tax money. There is no charge for use of the arboretum or any of the special shows held there, Wagner said. All the profits from food sales were donated to the organization and all the time given to put the show together was volunteered.

"The mushroom show raises about five percent of our annual budget," Wagner said.

The majority of mushrooms on display were gathered by Freeman's students. He teaches four classes at LCC, and he said many past students come back to help out.

Most of the mushrooms were from the Cascades, the Willamette Valley and the coast with the exception of one mushroom from Fresno, Calif., that one of Freeman's ex-students brought to the festival.

Many of the show's mushrooms were not edible. One card read, "DO NOT EAT: probably will cause some liver damage." Another read, "Edible but poisonous when eaten with any alcohol." Some of the mushrooms were absent because some deer ate them last night.

Wagner emphasized that in order to gather mushrooms a certain level of knowledge is necessary. He said he is only familiar with three or four species and their dangerous look-alikes so when he goes out, he takes only those. "You have to develop powers of discrimination," he explained.

Freeman said there are not a lot of cases where people pick and eat the wrong mushrooms. "It's rare in the Northwest. One to two people a year die," he said.

Generally in the United States people are more hesitant to gather and eat their own mushrooms in comparison to Europe and the Orient, Freeman said. He cited Switzerland as an example. "Mushrooms avidly are sought after. There are regulations about when and where you can pick. It's very controlled," he said.

As for trends in the states in the last 10 years, Freeman sees definite changes. "It used to be we who knew could go out and fill our baskets. But now many people are doing it and it's getting harder and harder," he explained.

Freeman said mushroom gathering has grown both individually and commercially. "Now in grocery stores you can buy more of a variety of mushrooms. People are beginning to appreciate the variety of mushrooms," he said.

People are beginning to show a greater interest in mushrooms because they are intrinsically interesting organisms, Freeman said. "There are perhaps 3,000 species in the Northwest. They are diverse, interesting, beautiful and they range from choice edible to deadly poisonous," he said.

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