

Diggin' in The Dirt: Mushrooms Worth Pursuing

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Oregon white truffle twins

Mushrooms worth pursuing are the two Oregon white truffles, *Tuber oregonense* and *Tuber gibbosum*. Both these small subterranean fungi are found in young (8 to possibly 65 year old) Douglas fir stands, particularly stands that are densely planted. *T. gibbosum* fruits from January to June. *T. orego-*



An Oregon white truffle is considered to be the equal of some of the great European truffles. Picture of a cut open T oregonense from Wikipedia (which, if you use it, deserves your support).

nense fruits from October to March.

They are mycorrhizal fungi. This means that the fungi cohabit in and on the roots of the Douglas fir and support the tree by extending its reach for moisture and selectively capturing minerals like phosphorus. They also produce some plant growth regulators. The truffle fungi move all this to the plant through fir roots they colonize. In return, the tree provides the fungi with carbohydrates and a complex mix of other compounds through the same vascular system.

Oregon white truffle spores are dispersed in the droppings of the animals that eat the fungus. The set of aromas they have developed to attract their spore-dispersing animals is quite astounding. Evidence of deer trails and

other wildlife tends to bode well for finding these fungi. It may also mean that they got there first when you go hunting truffles.

You will need a stout, steel tined potato rake to search for these elusive truffles in the soil right below the duff layer. Rake gently and watch for the brown to buff-colored irregularly shaped one to three inch rounded tubers. The tubers get darker on the outside as they get older. Inside the spongy truffle, the color will change from white to reddish brown to brown with white marbled veins as they mature. Older truffles will have a very pronounced smell, but that is their attraction for humans, pigs, dogs, squirrels, and voles. When you are done raking in an area, smooth out your raked-up piles.

Storing potatoes

While winter squash are easy to store, potatoes are difficult. Commercial potatoes are treated with a sprout inhibitor. Gardeners don't have that option, nor would many want it. There are some varieties that store better than others but that isn't easy information to find.

Root cellars were rarely built here because of our high winter water tables. They have to be thoughtfully constructed to be dry. The most common gardener storage is layering potatoes in a small garbage can with either sawdust or sand between the layers. Put the covered can in a cool area outside. Bring the can in if the weather gets bitter cold. Remove rotted and/or sprouted potatoes routinely. And plan to finish most of your spuds by Christmas.

Other garden topics

Don't store apples and pears with vegetables, especially carrots. Both fruit give off ethylene gas, a natural plant hormone. It can turn carrots quite bitter and can alter the texture and flavor of some other vegetables. I heard some years ago of a truck driver carrying a load of carrots from eastern Washington to the east coast. He put a box of apples in the reefer truck with the carrots. All the carrots (20 or so tons) were inedible when they were off-loaded.

The garden should be mulched with leaves, other organic matter, and/or horse, cattle, sheep, or goat manure to keep all our winter rain from compacting the soil. Mulches are also helpful around roses and berry plants. Roses can be high pruned to about 18 inches any time now.

If you haven't planted garlic, it isn't too late. Buy bulbs with large cloves and plant the cloves about four inches apart, two inches deep and in rows about twelve inches apart. Fertilize moderately and mulch lightly. Shoots won't generally emerge until mid-January.

Outdoor container plants should now be put in a protected location next to your house, bunched together. Plants which survive cold winter temperatures when planted in the ground will often be injured when exposed to the same temperatures in containers or pots. Roots in pots often die when temperatures drop below 18-20°F for any period of time. Row covers can increase the temperatures around planted containers by about 4-6 degrees. Remember to keep containers modestly watered if they are under eaves.

Meadow mice (also known as voles) would love to eat your trees and roses this winter. They are especially rough on woody plants during snow events. Make them nervous by keeping vegetation clipped tightly around your trees. Nervous mice cause fewer problems, especially if the owls and cats notice them. They don't hibernate and two to three inch holes give them away. It is possible to trap out a small population.

Skunks are not uncommon in our county. When dogs, cats, or humans confront skunks, the results are not appetizing. Tomato juice used to be the home remedy of choice for removing skunk odor. A more effective homemade formula blends one quart of hydrogen peroxide with a quarter cup of baking soda and a teaspoon of liquid soap. This mix apparently produces a gas so it shouldn't be sealed and stored. From personal experience with Clyde the beagle, I know that it works almost instantaneously. We applied it to his fur (avoiding his eyes)



after his two hour tete-a-tete with a skunk. We worked it in and after about five minutes, washed it off. Voila! Semi-sweet smelling Clyde could come inside. The skunk survived with no harm.

I just learned from a friend that lives in the Coast range somewhat south of us that beaver love Brussels sprouts and apparently anything else in the cabbage family. A whole crop of prime B sprouts were cut at ground level in his garden and carried away for supper. Who knew?

Free newsletter (what a deal!)

The Oregon State University Extension office in Columbia County publishes a monthly newsletter on gardening and farming topics (called Country Living) written/edited by yours truly. All you need to do is ask for it and it will be mailed or emailed to you. Call (503) 397-3462 to be put on the list. Alternatively, you can find it on the web at <http://extension.oregonstate.edu/columbia/> and click on newsletters.

Take excess produce to the food bank, senior centers, or community meals programs. Cash donations to buy food are also greatly appreciated.

The Extension Service offers its programs and materials equally to all people.

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