

There is Fungus Among Us

AGRI-VIEWS

by Chuck Otte, Geary County Extension Agent

Certain yard problems are more prone to show up under certain weather conditions. Lawn mushrooms, or toadstools, are one of those. I normally expect to see them after we've had an extended wet spell in the summer, not when we've had simply one rain event in the middle of a drought! Yet earlier this week, about ten days after a nice rain, a bunch of mushrooms, and more, appeared in the lawn at the office!

It doesn't matter if you call them mushrooms or toadstools (they're the same thing), they are the fruiting body of a fungal organism. The "parent" fungus is called a decay organism because it is actively feeding on decaying organic matter. Mushrooms grow rapidly when we have the "right" conditions for that species. Mushrooms produce and release spores into the wind. Think of spores as tiny little mushroom seeds. If these spores land in the right location under the right weather conditions they will start to grow and establish a new fungal colony. Mushrooms can develop and mature very quickly. The rain ten days prior to my observing the office mushrooms was all that was needed to get these mushrooms up and going.

These different fungus species, and there's lots of them, colonize and live on decaying organic matter. Some species, like the fairy ring mushrooms, will feed on dead grass roots. However, most of these species are feeding on decaying trees, tree roots or stumps. When a tree dies or it is cut down, the stump may be ground several inches into the ground but there's still part of it and all those roots spread throughout the yard. This wood slowly starts to rot and part of that rotting process is the breaking down by these mushroom fungal organisms. It may take several years after the tree is dead and gone before you start seeing the mushrooms.

There is no way to stop mushrooms from emerging in your yard. The fungal organism can be over a foot deep and spread over a large area. As mushrooms emerge you can kick them over or pluck them and put them in the trash. Over time, the food source will be depleted and the mushrooms will stop appearing.

If you have a tree that has any kind of a fungal growth (mushroom) growing out of it, or out of the base or even roots close to the trunk, it is not a good sign. The mushrooms are there because there is dead and rotting wood which means the structural integrity of the tree is being compromised. There is no way to predict when the tree will fail and fall so once the mushrooms are noticed you need to start making plans to have it removed as soon as possible.

Sometimes you'll also see something in your yard that may look like charcoal powder on grass leaves. Or you may go out one morning and see something on your mulch that looks like dog vomit, and you don't even own a dog. Both of these, and other similar strange things, are all part of a group of primitive organisms called slime molds. The spores drop from the air and if the conditions are right they'll grow rapidly and release more spores. The nutrients they need for growth are taken from the air, they are not feeding on the grass or the mulch, they simply use it for support. These will usually disappear as fast as they appeared but you can often wash them off with a garden hose or scoop them up and throw them in the trash.

If you have questions about mushrooms in your yard or growing on a tree, don't hesitate to contact me at the Extension Office, 785-238-4161, or cotte@ksu.edu. For photos of some of these oddities, go to <http://gardeningwithchuck.com/fungus.htm>.