

What Exactly is a Fungus?

A fungus (plural: fungi) is neither a plant nor an animal, but belongs to its own distinct group. The organism which produces the fruiting bodies you see is called a mycelium. It is composed of hyphae, which are chains of fungal cells. There are many different visible forms of fruiting bodies; many look like typical mushrooms, some like puff balls, there are small ones that are shaped like marine coral, some look like small cups, some grow like shelves on wood, some are spongy, some look like small stars, and others look like a head of cauliflower. Occasionally fungi of the same species can look slightly different.

What Are Fungi Doing in My Yard or Garden?

Fungi are the original recyclers. Many fungi are saprophytic, meaning they obtain energy by decomposing or breaking down organic materials. These fungi are able to decompose lignin in dead wood and return nutrients to the soil. Fungi, along with bacteria, decompose dead plants, animals, and waste products in the environment. They are a necessary part of nature.

VERY IMPORTANT

DO NOT EAT WILD MUSHROOMS you find. Many common mushrooms are poisonous. There is no simple rule-of-thumb used to tell if a wild mushroom is poisonous; only expert advice should be trusted. Many “non-poisonous” mushrooms may contain insects and bacteria which can make you sick. Reactions to mushrooms vary from person to person and season to season, so there is always the potential for a “non-poisonous” mushroom to make you very ill.

Where Can I Find Florida's Fungi?

The state of Florida has thousands of types of mushrooms. They grow all over the state, especially in wooded areas. The fruiting bodies (such as mushrooms) may only be visible for a few days or weeks but the fungi are in the soil all the time. Many of the fruiting bodies grow in damp dark areas because most do not need sunlight to grow. Places to find them are around plant roots, under leaf litter, in mulch, and on fallen trees or branches. These are suggestions, but always keep looking for fungi; it can be fun and you may be surprised where you find them. Lichens can be found on wood, on the ground, on rocks, or just about anywhere!

Fungi of Florida Lawns and Gardens

Photo Courtesy Wiki Commons



The shelf-shaped fungus known as Turkey Tail (*Trametes versicolor*) growing on a tree stump

A Few Selected Fungi Found in Florida Landscapes

Mycorrhizae are a group of fungi which are not saprophytic but mutualistic. They interact with plants in a way beneficial to both organisms. This group is found in association with the roots of over 80% of all terrestrial plants. Mycorrhizae provide plants with nutrients in exchange for energy-rich carbohydrates. Fruit trees and vegetables benefit from these fungi too small to see with the naked-eye.



Three types of lichens growing on a Royal Palm

Lichens are a combination of two organisms which also have a mutually beneficial relationship. Most of the lichen is composed of fungal filaments which are living with green algae or cyanobacteria. The algae or cyanobacteria make energy from sunlight that the fungi can use, while the fungi provide strength and protection. Lichens are epiphytes which do not harm the trees or rocks they grow on.



Photo Credit C. Anderson

The Stinkhorn fungus (*Clathrus columnatus*) often grows on mulch



Photo Courtesy Wiki Commons

An example of a fairy ring on turf grass. Most are harmless, but if mushrooms cause lawn die-off contact a landscaper or nursery for remedies



Photo Credit C. Anderson

The False Parasol (*Chlorophyllum* species), which is commonly seen in yards, causes severe poisoning if consumed



Flower pot mushrooms (*Leucocoprinus* species) sometimes grow in store-bought potting soil, even indoors