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v. 3 no. 4 pt. 1

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University of Oregon Leaflet Series

Published by the Extension Division

Botanical Series, No. 9 November, 1917 Vol. 3, No. 4, Part 1

Puff Balls

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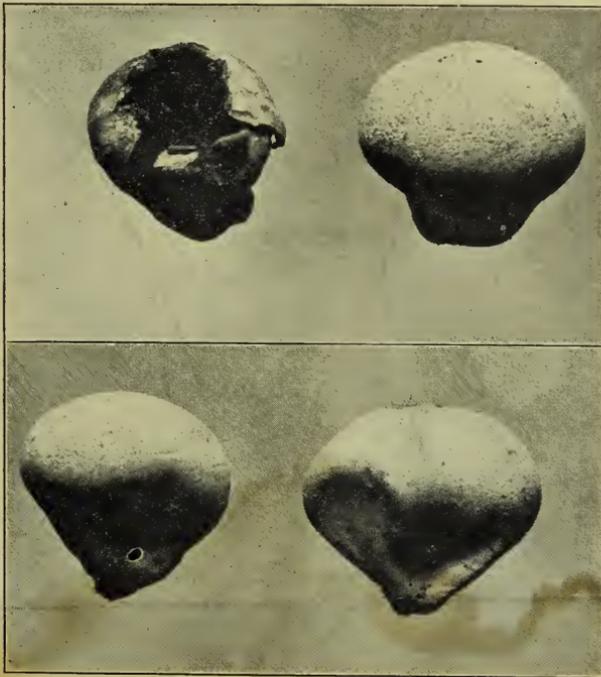


Figure 1

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Puff Balls

Toadstool Family (*Basidiomycetes*)

ALL puff balls are edible. “What,” someone says, “not those little brown balls, growing in the pastures, that send out a brown dust when trodden upon, they are not good to eat?” Certainly not in that stage, but if gathered while white within every member of this group is not only safe but delicious to eat, and cannot be mistaken for anything else. They grow entirely above the ground or the surface of dead wood or whatever they may be on, and when cut look spongy within and **never show any trace of gill**. The latter will distinguish them from the young or button stage of the common gill-bearing mushroom.

Some puff balls are no larger than one’s thumb, while a few species attain the size of a small pumpkin, with variation between these limits.



Figure 3

Figure 1 is the small, meadow puff ball, *Lycoperdon gemmetum*. The upper left hand one has matured and broken open by a sort of mouth to let the spores escape.

Figure 3 shows the thick skinned, giant puff ball, *Lycoperdon cyathiforme*.

There is an interesting sort of a fungus known as an Earth Star, Geaster. At first this appears like any other puff ball. but has a very thick skin. Later, this skin splits down and flattens out, giving the appearance of a star, in the center of which is perched a thin skinned puff ball, Figure 4.

Cooking

These puff balls may be cooked in any of the ways that mushrooms are served. If they have a thick skin they will need to be peeled. Remember that they must **never be used after they begin to turn color within**, but only while they are white and spongy.

Detailed Description

If cut lengthwise when young, they will appear more or less spongy within. In some, Figure 2. A, this spongy structure fills the whole of the inside, while in others there is a denser basal portion. If it were possible to examine a bit of this spongy portion under a microscope, we should find it to be made up of compacted masses of fine fungus threads known as hyphae, so



Section of Pasture Puffball
Figure 2.

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disposed as to form cavities, giving rise to the spongy appearance. On the ends of the threads terminating in these cavities are the spores. This characteristic places puff balls in the toadstool family.

There are different provisions for the escape and dissemination of the spores. In some cases, when ripe, the whole top bursts and liberates the cloud of spores; in others, a hole or pore forms and the escape must be through this. Some go to pieces and decay where they are, and must depend on the breezes to scatter their spores; while others break away from their attachment and go bowling along, scattering their spores over a wide area.

Food Value

In these days of strenuous conservation, the fleshy fungi are worth considering as an article of food. In former times, extravagant claims were made for them, being called, by some, vegetable meat. This was due to the supposedly high nitrogen content. But when we consider the large percent of moisture which they contain, and the fact that possibly not all the nitrogen can be used for food, it will be seen that their value is somewhat diminished. Some authorities consider them of no more value than cabbage or other common vegetables, and so not worth the risk.

But undoubtedly they are a valuable addition to our dietary, and if one sticks to perfectly known forms, they are safe and are worthy to be included as an article of food.



Figure 4. Earth Stars or Geasters