



Fungi are active throughout the year, feeding and gathering resources in readiness for autumn, when the fruiting bodies of brackets and toadstools make their spectacular appearance. Autumn is the time when cooler temperatures and rains provide the perfect humid conditions for spores to germinate and develop. Toadstools, and other visible fungi, are only the reproductive part of the life form, emerging solely for spore dispersal. Fungi lack chlorophyll and are therefore unable to build up compounds essential to life. Instead they draw their sustenance from decaying, and sometimes even living, organic matter. The main composition of the organism is made up of the mycelium which are minute tubes, like cobweb strands, growing into and through the host from which the fungus draws its nutrition.

Although fungi can occur almost anywhere in the countryside, it is in broad-leaved woodland where you will find the greatest variety. Walk through the same woodland in autumn two days following and you may notice toadstools that were not there the day before. This is not surprising as many

species emerge literally overnight. There are around 3,000 species of the larger fungi present in the UK.

Some of the more interesting fungi to admire include the Parasol Mushroom, usually found in grassland during late summer. As its name suggests it resembles an umbrella with a pale-buff cap up to ten inches across, covered in shaggy scales.

The Sulphur Tuft is a very common fungus, often occurring in huge troops of orange-yellow toadstools on deciduous tree stumps. The Porcelain Fungus is an attractive, white delicate toadstool found on the dead branches of living beech trees in autumn. The handsome Shaggy Pholiota forms dense clusters at the base of deciduous trees. Wax Caps are small toadstools, bright red, yellow, green or pink with greasy or slimy caps. These colourful, often conical organisms, occur in grassland in late autumn.

The fly agaric is the most striking toadstool, often depicted in children's fairy tales. It occurs mainly on acidic soils among the trunks of Scots pine or silver birch trees. The white specs on the crimson cap are the shrivelled remains of a veil, which protected the mushroom as it pushed up through the soil. It is poisonous and infamous for its psychoactive and hallucinogenic properties. Research has found the effects of consuming this mushroom inhibit fear and the startle reflex. Vikings were known to eat it prior to battle, which accounts for their uncontrollable rage and fearlessness.

Colin Varndell August 2026