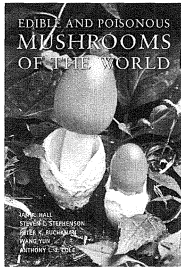


BOOK REVIEWS



EDIBLE AND POISONOUS MUSHROOMS OF THE WORLD

IAN R. HALL, STEVEN L. STEPHENSON, PETER K. BUCHANAN, WANG YUN, AND ANTHONY L. J. COLE

2003. 372 p. \$39.95. Hardcover. 253 color photos, 6 color illustrations, 3 tables. Timber Press. www.timberpress.com. ISBN 9780881925869.

In a recent book, Michael Pollan commented that popular writers on fungi tend to be carried away. Some of their statements make us wonder if they have nibbled a bit too much of certain genera. No, mushrooms aren't going to save the world. No, they do not live on mysterious energies (unknown to physicists) that come from the moon (and calories are not a concept that refers only to sunlight, as the same famous guru claims). No, or at most barely maybe, to several other pointless fancies. What is it about these organisms that causes them to gain such power over people's minds?

The present book is not in this category. It is a sober, scholarly, very useful reference on just what its title claims. Perhaps some people will be offended by the fact that it is also one of the most beautiful books of recent years. Combined beauty and intellect? The rest of us will ignore these puritans. We will just be enjoying while learning and perhaps nibbling.

According to L. H. Bailey in the early 20th century, until 1903 all commercial spawn in the USA was imported from England. So we were far behind a century ago. Now we learn that the Chinese are the really big mushroom raisers, and they not only eat vast amounts (no surprise there), but export a billion or so dollars worth each year. The USA is catching up in production techniques, volume of production, sales, and consumption, plus popular interest. How and what is being done, in China, America, Down-Under, etc. is explained in the book. A minor quibble—it is said mushrooms are the fifth largest crop in the USA. Living in a state where commercial production is just starting, that seems hard to believe. But the main problem is that fungi are a vast array of only distantly related

organisms. Comparing them to one, such as *Zea mays*, is not good statistical procedure.

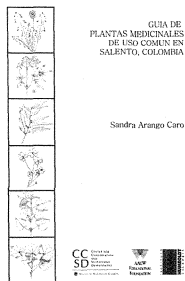
Yeasts are not covered, and the recent appearance of commercial mycorrhiza producers is given minimal coverage. If only we could mass produce mycorrhizae for oaks, conifers, orchids, and many other desirable plants on the scale and as economically as is done for some edible mushrooms, our efforts to restore nature would be benefited. But some mushrooms of great economic value (truffles are the most famous) resist farming. We may think of fungi as more or less the same sort of things, but they are at least as ecologically finicky and specialized as vascular plants or tropical fish, probably far more so.

In one respect fungi are much like too many vascular plants and vertebrate animals. They are disappearing. There is a great conservation crisis in all three groups (and, of course, other organisms). When many mushrooms are difficult or just plain unknown as to cultivation, we have a frightening situation. Little known fungi may . . . well, we don't know what they may do or be useful for. But with all due respect to the bird-lovers, not many products are expected from birds in the future. With fungi as well? They just might . . . what? We don't know and may never know. Consider *Gyromitra esculenta*; never trust a taxonomist—after all, they gave this deadly fungus such a misleading epithet (*esculenta* means delicious). But more important, it produces a chemical precursor to methyl hydrazine—a rocket fuel! The common oyster mushroom is safe and good to eat, grows easily and rapidly, and converts petroleum to edible food and harmless simple molecules. What else can mushrooms do?

Meanwhile, we need to look at the hundreds of beautiful color photos in this book. We may be able to hook some students into mycology careers. We need to read, study, think about many aspects of what is in the text: cultivatable termite mound mushrooms, biofuels, novelty luminescent oddities, and real yum-yum items for dinner, medicine, ecological restoratives, subjects for artists and photographers. We have been very far behind in giving fungi their rightful place in our economies, our biological concepts, our thinking about our world. A number of new books, mostly on identification and/or culture, have recently appeared. More will come and be welcome. This book can be given an honored place on our shelves among all of them.

About the authors: Ian Hall is a scientist with Crop and Food Research in New Zealand, specializing in edible mushrooms and mycorrhizas. Steve Stephenson is a research professor at the University of Arkansas in Fayetteville. Peter Buchanan works as a mycologist at the Mt. Albert Research Centre, Auckland, New Zealand. Wang Yun is a mycologist at Invermay Agricultural Centre, New Zealand, specializing in the beneficial effects of ectomycorrhizas, edible mushrooms, and silviculture.

—*John Beckner*
Adjunct Professor
Ringling School of Art and Design
Sarasota, Florida



GUÍA DE LAS PLANTAS MEDICINALES DE USO COMÚN
EN SALENTO, COLOMBIA
(Guide to the commonly used medicinal plants of
Salento, Colombia)

SANDRA ARANGO CARO

2004. 71p. \$12.95. Spiral bound, softcover, 29 b/w illustrations.
Language: Spanish. Missouri Botanical Garden Press. St. Louis, MO.
www.mbgpress.info. ISBN 1-930723-30-X

This guidebook is an effort to recover knowledge of the traditional use of plants in the highly deforested Andean region of Salento, Colombia. A total of 29 species are described, eight native and 21 exotic. Each description consists of the vernacular name of the plant, followed by the scientific name(s), its general features, traditional uses, preparation methods, propagation, and a black and white illustration that will often aid in identification of medicinal plants at a local level.

The information presented in this guidebook is the result of the quantitative analysis of 196 interviews conducted with 162 women and 34 men, who are mentioned in detail in the acknowledgments. A brief introduction to the pro-

ject, the study site and the methodology precedes the botanical descriptions and is followed by a glossary, references and an index of scientific names.

Through this guidebook the Salento community has a tool to train future generations in the uses and propagation of medicinal plants. An alternative for new economic initiatives that could provide employment is given, one of the main goals of this publication.

—Lorena Endara
Ph.D. Student
Botany Dept.
University of Florida
Gainesville, Florida