

Best Practices for Mushroom Foraging in Kentucky



University of Kentucky
College of Agriculture,
Food and Environment
Cooperative Extension Service
Forestry and Natural Resources
Extension

Ellen Crocker, *Forestry and Natural Resources, University of Kentucky*
Brandon George, *Kenton County Cooperative Extension, University of Kentucky*
Megan Buland, *Forestry and Natural Resources, University of Kentucky*

FOR-171

Kentucky is a great place to forage wild mushrooms. Its extensive forests are home to many different edible fungi including morels, chanterelles, lions' mane, chicken of the woods, oyster mushrooms, and more. While mushroom hunting is a great hobby, it is not without risks. Many mushrooms can cause illness if consumed and some are deadly poisonous, resulting in lasting illness or even death. Even those broadly considered edible should be approached cautiously as improper storage and cooking, drug interactions, and allergies can all result in adverse reactions. Care **must** be taken by foragers to ensure both the safety of those eating wild foraged mushrooms and that natural areas are not disturbed through collection.

In addition to practicing proper safety strategies while mushroom hunting, it is important to be aware of, and follow, regulations about where and how to mushroom hunt. Be aware that each state may have its own set of rules and regulations surrounding mushroom foraging and that the rules in Kentucky may be different from those in other states. This publication provides information on regulations in the state of Kentucky.

WHERE TO HUNT?

The location of a favorite morel patch is typically a closely guarded secret. Most new mushroom hunters will have to find the best spots themselves through years of trial and error.

Mushroom hunting on private land:

You can collect any mushrooms growing on your own property. There are no regulations on mushroom species, or endangered mushroom species, in the state to be concerned about when foraging.

The main 'body' of a fungus exists as a network of thread-like filaments (called hyphae), growing in the soil, in wood, or on whatever else the fungus might be feeding. What we call a mushroom, is the fruiting part of the fungus, much like an apple is the fruit of an apple tree. If you are just taking the mushrooms, you are unlikely to damage the main body of the fungus that produces them. Because of this, overharvesting is less of a concern for mushrooms than for other species of plants or animals. However, you should keep in mind



Figure 1. Chanterelles, like these smooth chanterelles (*Cantharellus lateritius*) are a favorite mushroom to forage in the summer-time. Photo credit: Ellen Crocker, University of Kentucky



Figure 2. Hen of the woods (*Grifola frondosa*) is a favorite fall mushroom that grows at the base of oak trees. Photo credit: Ellen Crocker, University of Kentucky

sustainable foraging principals and the value of leaving uncollected mushrooms around to continue to produce spores. While most of the foraged mushrooms in Kentucky are ephemeral (they quickly come and go), there are some mushrooms, particularly polypores foraged for medicinal value, that may have perennial fruiting bodies and overharvest can be a concern for these. Taking only a small portion of the mushrooms you find means that there will be mushrooms left over for other foragers, and for the wildlife that may rely on these mushrooms as an essential source of food in their environment.

Be careful not to damage the area you are collecting from. For example, trampling the forest floor can result in conditions that aren't conducive to fungal growth. Be mindful of other mushrooms and plants growing in the area you are collecting from and try to avoid injuring these plants or otherwise damaging the environment. Also keep in mind the history of land use where you are foraging, as well as potential pesticides or toxins that may currently or previously have been used in the area.

If you are hoping to forage on someone else's land, **MAKE SURE** to first receive permission and then clearly communicate with the landowner. Just as you would when hunting wildlife on someone else's land, you must respect the landowner who is allowing you to hunt on their property.

Mushroom hunting on public land:

Each public area in Kentucky has its own regulations regarding foraging of wild mushrooms. It is important to follow them and regularly check on these regulations as they may change.



Figure 3. Morels like this one are mycorrhizal and emerge only in the spring. Photo credit: Ellen Crocker, University of Kentucky

Table 1. Mushroom Hunting Status of Public Lands in Kentucky

Location	Mushroom hunting status*	Other regulations to follow
Daniel Boone National Forest	Allowed, no permit required	Individuals may collect small quantities (approximately one gallon per person) for personal use. A permit will be required if these products will be collected in larger quantities or for commercial purposes.
Mammoth Cave National Park	Edible fungi- Allowed, no permit required Inedible fungi- Not permitted	Individuals may collect small quantities (one gallon, per person, per day) of edible fungi for personal use of consumption. All edible fungi must be collected in a mesh container. Inedible fungi may not be collected for medicinal, artistic, or other uses.
Land Between the Lakes National Forest	Allowed, no permit required	Mushrooms may be gathered. However, damage to plants or trees is illegal. Also make sure to follow prohibition on destruction, defacement, disturbance, or removal of any building, sign, structure, barrier, natural feature, archaeological artifact (including "scrap" metal), or public property.
State Forests	Allowed if permit acquired	Mushroom hunting is allowed but each person needs to first acquire a "Free Use Permit" from the local forest manager. To do this, call the KDF Frankfort office at 502-564-4496.
Wildlife Management Areas (WMAs)	Allowed, no permit required	Mushrooms may be gathered for personal consumption, but note that the collection of plants is prohibited. Some WMAs are closed to the public during periods when quota deer hunts are occurring. Please check current hunting guides or the KY Department of Fish and Wildlife Resources website at fw.ky.gov
State Parks and State Historic Sites	Collection is prohibited	
Nature Preserves	Collection is prohibited	
Bernheim Arboretum and Research Forest	Collection is prohibited	
Berea Forest	Collection is prohibited	Some exceptions may be made, inquire with managers for more information.
The Nature Conservancy Properties	Collection is prohibited	
Other parks and natural areas	Inquire with park manager, regulations vary.	

*This applies to non-commercial (personal consumption) mushroom foraging. Please check with each location on regulations regarding educational collection and research use as permits may be needed. Commercial mushroom foraging is generally not permitted. **Status and regulations are subject to change.**

SALE OF WILD FORAGED MUSHROOMS IN KENTUCKY

In general, the Kentucky Department of Agriculture does not allow the sale of wild foraged mushrooms. KDA regulation 3-201.16 specifies that mushroom species picked in the wild shall not be offered for sale or service by a food establishment unless the food establishment has been approved to do so by an approved mushroom identification expert. However,

there is currently no formalized system in place to determine what qualifies a mushroom expert or how these are approved. If you have questions about this, inquire with the Kentucky Department of Agriculture.

This ban in sales DOES NOT apply for cultivated mushrooms, which can be sold in Kentucky.



Figure 4. There are several different species of Hericium mushrooms, like lion's mane (*Hericium erinaceus*) and coral tooth (*Hericium coralloides*), both of which have teeth instead of gills or pores. Photo credit: Ellen Crocker, University of Kentucky

Educational programs of Kentucky Cooperative Extension serve all people regardless of economic or social status and will not discriminate on the basis of race, color, ethnic origin, national origin, creed, religion, political belief, sex, sexual orientation, gender identity, gender expression, pregnancy, marital status, genetic information, age, veteran status, or physical or mental disability. Issued in furtherance of Cooperative Extension work, Acts of May 8 and June 30, 1914, in cooperation with the U.S. Department of Agriculture, Nancy M. Cox, Director, Land Grant Programs, University of Kentucky College of Agriculture, Food and Environment, Lexington, and Kentucky State University, Frankfort. Copyright ©2023 for materials developed by University of Kentucky Cooperative Extension. This publication may be reproduced in portions or its entirety for educational or nonprofit purposes only. Permitted users shall give credit to the author(s) and include this copyright notice. Publications are also available on the World Wide Web at www.ca.uky.edu.