

Forest Fungi in Ireland

Seminar Report – 28th August 2009, Avondale, Rathdrum, Co. Wicklow
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Coming originally from a Country where fungal foraging is at least in some families a traditional Sunday afternoon event I was surprised to find out that “in Ireland, the lack of a foraging tradition as well as the absence of information has deterred collection”. To change the later point and encouraged by a growing interest in the public to know more about natural wild foods COFORD established an ambitious Working Group on Forest Fungi.

Outcome of this group and based on an earlier study by Louis Smith a new publication was launch “Forest Fungi in Ireland” dealing for the first time purely with Irish fungi. In conjunction with this publication launch COFORD hosted a half day seminar on forest fungi, followed by a fungal foray in Avondale's woods, identification and cooking and tasting of the collected fungi. Due to the expertise of the authors Dr. Paul Dowding and Louis Smith and invited guest speakers the seminar gave a good introduction to the infectious fascination of fungi.

Fungal Diversity in Irish Forest Ecosystems

During the seminar it was explained for the layman that there are two different groups of fungi that affect tree growth:

- symbiotic fungi: such as mycorrhizing fungi which live in an association with a plant. Both the fungus and the tree benefit from this relation. Trees depend on mycorrhizal fungi to extract phosphates, other nutrients and water more efficiently.
- pathogenic fungi: such as root rot (*Heterobasidion annosum*) are first killing and then digesting host tissue.

It was discussed if there is a potential for forest fungi as Non Timber Forest Products (NTFPs) as:

- raw material for domestic use or local restaurant trade
- processed food
- bioindicators of forest health
- recreation and education activities (guided fungi foray walks)
- to improve timber yields

Initial difficulties of establishing forest fungi as NTFPs include:

- the identification and establishment of potential markets
- that there is no country wide network, e.g. of catering outlets which are willing to buy in wild fungi
- that it is a relatively new enterprise: the economic viability needs to be first assessed, e.g. inoculating trees before planting in order to get higher fungi yields
- that the valuable edible fungi are difficult to cultivate because they require to associate with a living host tree (e.g. truffles, chanterelles, ceps, hedgehog fungus)
- that there is no County-wide network of specialists to verify the edibility of the picked fungi for the layman

Northern Ireland Fungus Group

One of the founders of the Northern Irish Fungus Group, Dr. Gerry Shannon gave a short introduction about how the Northern Irish Fungus group was established and encouraged to do something similar in Ireland. The group is run completely voluntarily and promotes the conservation and interest in fungi in Northern Ireland. More information about the group is available online at: www.nifg.org.uk

More information about the Working group on Forest Fungi and about Forest Fungi in Ireland can be found at: www.fungus.ie

