Coastal Plant Care

Why Do I Have Mushrooms on My Trees and Turf?

Mushrooms, or fungal fruiting bodies, are some of nature's most beautiful and diverse organisms on Earth. Not only are there thousands of types fungi and mushrooms, they can be found in nearly every corner of our planet. Subsequently, they are some of the most misunderstood visitors in our landscapes. Are they edible? Are they poisonous? Where did they come from? In addition to their beauty and diversity, they have been used for medicinal purposes for thousands of years. Let's examine what mushrooms may tell us about your garden.

Mushrooms on trees:

Most often, fungi found on trees are located near any portion of the plant that contains decaying wood, roots, or bark. In some cases, mushrooms will appear on or near areas of the tree where limbs were recently removed. Mushrooms will often appear following moist spells on or near the root zone. Some will appear and disappear within a span of hours where others may persist for months. The type of fungal fruiting bodies found on trees is wide ranging and will depend on the climate, species, and location of the tree. Airborne fungal spores will find their way into a tree though abnormalities such as cracks, wounds, missing bark, or pruning cuts. Once these fungi have established themselves in the plant, they will produce the fungal fruiting structures we know as mushrooms.

Fungi are opportunistic. Rarely will fungi spores take hold in a tree that is young and healthy. Rather, they find suitable hosts in plants that are usually older, unhealthy, or dead. In some cases, fungi can increase the speed of decline or death of a plant and in others, they are simply visual clues the plant may be compromised. Those that harm trees do so by occupying the vascular system of the plant and subsequently limiting water and nutrient flow. Once a tree is infected by a fungus and mushrooms appear, there is little, if anything, you can do to eradicate the fungal infection. You may wish to call a certified master arborist, a professional trained in diagnosing and recommending treatment for various tree diseases.

Occasionally, if the infected limb is removed, you can save the tree. In other cases, the tree must be completely removed as the mushrooms may be indicative of root loss, trunk decay, or sapwood decay. The fungus and spores may also live in the soil, proving to be problematic for other trees or shrubs planted in the same spot. An arborist may suggest methods to expedite the process of removing fungi from soil. **I strongly recommend taking pictures of any mushrooms you note on your plant material as they may disappear in a matter of days**. Just because the mushroom is gone does not mean the plant if void of the fungus responsible.

It is important to understand the implications a mushroom may have on your tree. In many cases, they denote a serious issue such as root loss or internal trunk decay that need to be qualified to fully understand the risk the tree poses.

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Mushrooms on turf:

Mushrooms frequently appear after rainfall or in areas of your yard that are shaded, wet, or compacted. Unlike trees, mushrooms in your yard are rarely signs of something sinister. If your lawn has standing water or remains damp for long periods after a rain, you soil may be compacted. Aerating your lawn would increase drainage. Better drainage helps decrease the moisture that encourages mushrooms. It also helps to increase the amount of oxygen that gets to the roots of your grass. Excess thatch absorbs moisture and can provide a suitable habitat for fungi to occupy. Along with de-compacting and/or aerating your soil, de-thatching your lawn can also help keep mushrooms away.

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In many cases, mushrooms can appear in areas high in decomposing organic material. These areas include sites where trees were removed, beds have been mulched, or tree roots have decayed or been severed. As previously stated, mushrooms in your yard are visual nuisances but rarely signs you have a major problem.

It's important to note that fungal spores are naturally occurring in nearly every soil. In the case of mycorrhizae, a naturally occurring soil fungi, the benefits are astounding for plants. Mycorrhizae maintains a symbiotic relationship with tree and shrub roots to assist the plant with water and nutrient uptake. Soils void of organic material and adequate pore space rarely maintain fungal populations. These poor soils are also unsuitable to grow plant material. The pros and cons of mushrooms vary just as dramatically as the number of species in our gardens. However, they provide us with critical visual tools that can assist in diagnosing and treating a number of plant issues.

Lastly, before you consume any edible mushroom, remember to confirm your snack with an expert. Happy gardening!

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