

# Mid-Atlantic mushroom foragers collect 160 species for food, medicine, art and science

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Pennsylvania is home to a diverse range of wild mushrooms, both edible and poisonous.

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Like many mushroom harvesters, I got interested in foraging for fungi during the COVID-19 pandemic.

I had been preparing for a summer of field work studying foraged desert plants in a remote part of Australia when the pandemic hit, and my travel plans were abruptly frozen. It was March, right before morel mushrooms emerge in central Pennsylvania.

I wasn't doing a lot other than going on long hikes and taking classes remotely at Penn State for my doctoral degree in ecology and anthropology. One of the classes was an agroforestry class with Eric Burkhardt. We studied how agriculture and forests benefit people and the environment.

These two things eventually led to a yearslong project on mushroom harvesting in our region.

## Why people forage

Foragers have been harvesting wild mushrooms in what is now Pennsylvania and the rest of the U.S. mid-Atlantic region for generations, but the extent and specifics of the practice in the region had not been formally studied.

In 2021, Burkhart and I decided that we wanted to better understand the variety of wild mushroom species that Pennsylvania harvesters collect and what they use them for.

We conducted a series of surveys in 2022 and 2023 that revealed a wide variety of fungi are foraged in the region – though morels, chicken of the woods and chanterelles are most common. We also learned that harvesters use the mushrooms primarily for food and medicinal purposes, and that foragers create communities that share knowledge. These community based projects often use social media tools as a way for mushroom harvesters to share pictures, notes and even the results of DNA sequences.

Our findings were published in the journal Economic Botany in October 2025.

## 160 species

Having spent a year building connections with local mushroom harvesters, starting in central Pennsylvania, including members of mushroom clubs and mycological associations, we recruited a diverse group of harvesters from around the mid-Atlantic. We also used mushroom festivals, social media and word of mouth to get the word out.

We asked harvesters about their favorite mushrooms, common harvesting practices, resources they used while harvesting and any sustainability practices.

Over 800 harvesters responded to the survey and reported that, collectively, they foraged 160 species of wild mushrooms. Morels and chicken of the woods were the two most popular, as each were reported by 13% of respondents. About 10% of respondents reported collecting chanterelles. Other popular species were hen of the woods, oysters, lion's mane, black trumpet, honey mushroom, turkey tail, bolete, reishi, puffball, chaga, shrimp of the woods and Dryad's saddle, which is also known as the pheasant's back mushroom.

Harvesters reported a variety of reasons for collecting mushrooms. Many collected morels and chanterelle to eat, and species such as turkey tail, reishi and chaga for medicinal purposes. Art was another common reason cited for foraging, with photography being the most popular use, followed by using mushrooms to create natural dyes and pigments.

Other survey respondents said they foraged to feel more connected to nature. And while there is a thriving commercial wild mushroom industry in the region, we found that only a small minority of harvesters sell their mushrooms. Most people reported giving their mushrooms to friends, neighbors and family.



Mushroom foraging can be a way for people to connect with nature.

*Natalia Lebedinskaia/Moment Collection via Getty Images*

## Citizen science

We also wanted to better understand which resources mushroom harvesters turn to in order to learn more about this hobby. We asked all the harvesters what they used as a resource when they were first learning to hunt for mushrooms. A quarter of new harvesters said they used the “the internet,” followed by “family,” at 24%, and then guide books, at 20%.

Based on the survey responses, we also learned that mushroom-identification phone apps are growing in popularity, especially among new harvesters. For example, a commonly used app called iNaturalist allows harvesters to upload a few pictures of their find – one of the mushroom in its habitat, another of the underside of the cap, and a third of the entire mushroom. From there, other community members can comment and help with identification.

Harvesters also use these apps to contribute to community science projects that document biodiversity.

Some mushrooms are poisonous if eaten, which is part of why harvesters are so careful with their identification. When learning a new mushroom species, it’s important to look into multiple sources to make sure what you’re harvesting is safe to eat.

With more harvesters documenting their findings on social media and sharing information about fungal biodiversity in the region, there is much to glean and learn about the diverse world of mushrooms in the mid-Atlantic. We believe that deeper collaboration between community groups and researchers at universities and other institutions is an opportunity for scientific growth within the field of mycology. This collaboration can support long-term tracking of fungal populations and any impact that harvesters might have on them.



Chicken of the woods mushrooms are among the most commonly foraged. When cooked, their flavor resembles that of chicken.

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