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## Growing mushrooms

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By Alex Féthière

*Photo in the print edition:* Big-leaf maple logs bearing shiitake and lion's mane mushrooms after two years of challenging colonization. (Journal photo by Alex Féthière)

Whether in an apartment or on land, you've got the space for mushrooms. Maybe you've seen the kits that let you grow oysters, shiitake, even medicinal reishi from sawdust.

That was my first experience with truly fresh shiitake, harvested from a block of myceliated sawdust encased in a partially vented plastic bag. They were so delicious that a roommate, who never took much of a shine to my food but felt entitled to it, demanded imperiously that I cook them regularly.

That was out of the question within two weeks because green and gray molds had eclipsed the fragrant white mycelia, cutting the mushrooms off at the roots. The second "flush" of shiitake withered and died. Was it poisoned by something sporulating in the 1924 house?

Mushrooms growing on wood in a forest seemed a more natural undertaking after that. Knowing that forests are already full of mushrooms, I was careful to cut the right wood at the correct time and inoculate it meticulously, giving my shiitake, lion's mane and reishi every advantage.

Big-leaf maple was recommended as a substrate for those three varieties. I cut some trees from my woodlot that were 6 to 8 inches in diameter in spring, just before bud break. In 4-foot-long logs they're easy to handle, while still containing enough material to sustain mushroom colonies for up to five years.

After packing holes I'd drilled with plugs (wooden dowels hammered in) or sawdust (messy cylinders of spawn-filled sawdust stuffed in), I dabbed the inoculation sites with a mix of beeswax and paraffin. The ends of each log had to be wax-dipped as well to exclude competing fungi.

That was two years ago. I did another batch last year because I'd despaired of good results from the 2019 edition. I had left them on the forest floor, where they were eagerly jobbed over by rodents in late winter. Holes in the logs filled with pillbugs. Teethmarks in the wax had breached the sanctity of every log, and I expected a fine crop of Turkey tail at best, typhus at worst.

Turkey tail, a medicinal forest fungus omnipresent in South Sound, had already begun to fruit from these logs. I reasoned that I'd left them on the forest floor, after all. It was all I could do to stack them in a shopping cart to protect the last few wax caps through the next winter.

The 2020 logs were elevated in a shopping cart as well and suffered little from rodents or potato bugs. Two shopping carts faced each other, bristling with logs, under a Douglas fir and western cedar. They were occasionally hit by a sprinkler over summer for one to two years.

One friend and one acquaintance have attempted to grow wood-rot mushrooms. The acquaintance enjoyed modest success in a coniferous forest setting, using alder of dimensions similar to mine in growing shiitake. I think he eventually lost interest, having hoped for a mushrooming business that failed to fruit.

The friend also used alder, but placed his logs near his house and kept them moist with regular dunks in a kiddie pool. Though a circumspect fellow with great attention to process, his logs bore nothing.

In struggling to steward everyone through the brutal heat of last summer, I neglected to water the mushroom logs as much as usual. Though they enjoyed partial shade from the mixed coniferous canopy, I'd almost written them off. I certainly didn't visit them regularly.

While looking for a dropped tool recently, I glimpsed some amorphous lumps on the 2019 logs. On closer inspection, I found several shiitake and lion's mane logs had fruited.

The torrential rains had waterlogged the mushrooms, and slugs had gnawed the most bedraggled specimens. I had probably missed them by a week or two, but found a couple of shiitake that were still edible. They were pretty good, all considered, and I dried the rest.

The young lion's manes still had growing to do and had largely shrugged off the wet. Seeing that they are best dry-fried before sauteeing in butter, I expect they will be even more true to form.

■ *Alex Féthière has lived on Harstine Island long enough to forget New York City, where he built community gardens and double-dug his suburban sod into a victory garden. He can be reached at [onlandist@gmail.com](mailto:onlandist@gmail.com).*