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FINDING A NEW HOME SOMETIMES ISN'T EASY.



By Matt Wake
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CLEMSON — Tramping through dewy woods, Julia Kerrigan and her confederates look inside dead logs, on forest floors and between sprawling roots. They're looking for mushrooms.

An assistant professor of mycology at Clemson University, Kerrigan is co-founder of the South Carolina Upstate Mycological Society, which also goes by the somewhat creepy anachronism SCUMS. Even though Kerrigan studies and teaches about mushrooms, she eats very few of them. What she likes is the hunt.

"It's a totally different perspective; you have a different way of looking at your environment," Kerrigan said. "You hone in on small things on the ground or little things on trees. Even if you don't find anything, you've spent the morning out in the woods." SCUMS meets the first Tuesday evening of every month at the Littlejohn Community Center in Clemson. Eight meetings into its existence, the group includes about 10 members. During meetings, guest speakers riff on fungi-related subjects — October's topic: "Home is where the gut is, trichomycetes in insect guts" — but you don't have to be a scientist to follow along, Kerrigan said.

"We didn't want to have meetings on campus so we could keep them open to anybody, and they didn't feel they had to know anything about mushrooms."

On Saturdays following their meetings, SCUMS members hold forays to search for specimens. The members meet up at 8 a.m. in the [Blooms grocery](#) store parking lot on Highway 123, then carpool to local wooded areas, like the Clemson Experimental Forest or Stumphouse Mountain State Park.

"You have to check on permits before picking, as it is not allowed everywhere," Kerrigan said.

A would-be mushroom hunter also has to worry about poisonous varieties. At Clemson, Kerrigan receives plenty of phone calls from locals wondering whether a particular mushroom is edible or not. That's a good thing.

"People should never eat a mushroom unless they 100 percent know what it is. There are look-a-likes that can kill you, and there are lots of things that won't kill you but what will make you sick."

Case in point: the destroying angel. The bright white mushroom earns its dark name, a virtual death sentence for those who mistakenly gobble one.

"There's usually nothing even a hospital can do for you," Kerrigan said.

There's a distinct seasonality to mushrooms. The pursuit is also hyper-localized, thus warranting the publication of thousands of field guides. Because of this striation, there isn't an absolute Bible of mushroom hunting; although Kerrigan recommends "Mushrooms of the Southeastern United States" by Alan Bessette as a good place to start.

What a mushroom foray really needs is precipitation. Kerrigan and fellow SCUMS co-founder Tradd Cotter considered starting such a group in 2007, but drought conditions postponed the launch.

"It would have been kind of pointless. It never rained," Kerrigan said.

Forays begin in the mornings because some mushrooms don't make it through a single day in the wild. Other species can stay sturdy for weeks.

"Some fungi are very fragile and don't last, and those tend to be fresher. Some get more buggy throughout the day; there are things that like to eat them," Kerrigan said.

Although Kerrigan is more about the experience, there are some edible beauties she likes to find. Morels, often found in areas that have been flooded, are at the top of the list. Kerrigan relishes their subtle, nutty flavor, and prepares them with [pasta](#) or eggs.

"The hunt for those is really fun. Morels are hard to find; they really blend in with their environment," Kerrigan said.

Then there are chanterelles, known for their fruity, peppery notes and delicate texture. Kerrigan likes to use chanterelles as a pizza topping.

There are many other edible mushrooms growing wild in the Upstate, including chicken of the woods, which tastes like — surprise — chicken. The firm texture of lobster mushrooms, which look like their namesake's shell, excels when sautéed in [olive oil](#).

Even inedible varieties can elicit wonder. Some parasitize other mushrooms while others feed on dead insects, a yellowish stalk arising from a tiny carcass. For Kerrigan, the pinnacle of a wet morning hike is discovering a specimen she never found before,

"It's a glorified Easter egg hunt," she said.

For more information on the South Carolina Upstate Mycological Society, visit www.scumsonline.com/index.asp or contact Julia Kerrigan via e-mail, jkerrig@clemson.edu, or phone, (864) 656-2640.

Photo
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Photo courtesy [Mushroom Mountain](#)

A blewit mushroom is shown above. Other locally found varieties include: chanterelle, [chicken](#) of the woods, lactarius, [lobster](#) and morel.

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Photo courtesy Mushroom Mountain

[Chanterelle](#)

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Photo courtesy Mushroom Mountain

Chicken of the woods

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Lactarius

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Lobster

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Morel

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