

Grow your own shiitake supply

By Beth Burwinkel
Enquirer contributor

Wes Duren has been growing mushrooms at home for about a decade, and he plans to get a few new gardeners growing them this year.

The landscape and nursery manager at Marvin's Organic Gardens in Lebanon has rows of shiitakes sprouting out of oak logs he maintains under a canopy of shrubs and trees in his yard.

It's a hobby first inspired by a book he read on the medicinal and gourmet qualities of mushrooms written by Arizona mushroom guru Paul Stamets.

Mushrooms can be grown both indoors, too, but Duren says because shiitakes are so aggressive, it's easier for beginners to grow them outdoors.

Duren grows shiitake mushrooms on oak logs of 4- to 6-inch diameters that are harvested in late fall through winter, many by local arborists. He says other logs, such as hickory and beech, will work, too, but oak is best, and four-foot logs are the perfect length to work with.

He uses a hammer drill with a 5/16-inch paddle bit to create holes six inches apart along the entire bark surface, in alternating rows. He buys shiitake mushroom spawn on pellets from Stamets (www.fungiperfecti.com), placing spawn plugs in each hole and pounding them into the log. He seals the holes with melted cheese wax, which keeps insects out and helps hold in moisture.

A stump of a newly removed oak tree can also be used for growing mushrooms, Duren says, and as an extra benefit, the mushroom production will eventually rot the stump.

After the logs are prepared, they need shade, air movement and access to water. Logs should be watered when it is dry, Duren says.

"The goal is you don't want the log to dry out," Duren says. "They really like moisture."

Duren says that he can tell that shiitakes have taken over the logs after about six to eight months, when a white "X" appears on both ends of the logs.

Alpha mushroom

Duren notes that the gills on the shiitake's cap and creamy white underside are distinct from poisonous varieties. They also have a sweet, fungal but fragrant, scent.

"There's nothing else out there in the fungi community that I've found like a shiitake," Duren says.

Once a log is inoculated, the shiitake pushes out competitors, he said.

It takes about 8-12 months for the first harvest. The logs will produce a crop in the spring and fall for up to 10 years, depending on its size, Duren says.

He plans to produce some extra logs this winter and sell them to customers in the spring at Marvin's.

Duren cautions people to never pick mushrooms in the wild unless they are with an expert. If you plan to eat mushrooms, buy them from a store or reputable source - same with buying spawn.

Driven indoors

Billy and Rebecca Webb grow 26 varieties of mushrooms at their business, Sheltoewe Farm near Lexington. They began growing mushrooms in 2001, starting with shiitakes. They also built a facility to grow other types of mushrooms indoors.

Recent severe droughts destroyed most of their shiitake logs. While a homeowner with a small number of logs could have watered them, it was not possible to water all the logs at the farm, he said.

They now grow most of their shiitakes indoors on blocks made of sterilized sawdust. They prepare the football-sized blocks in a pressure cooker.

When people are interested in harvesting shiitake mushrooms at home, Billy Webb says he sells blocks that are ready to fruit for about \$12. He teaches buyers how to create an indoor humidification structure for growing mushrooms.

The Webbs sell their mushrooms in many places, including Hyde Park Farmer's Market. For more information about their blocks, contact Billy Webb at www.sheltoweefarm.com.

Additional Facts

Learn to grow

For more information, consider a class on growing mushrooms.

The Civic Garden Center is planning a class on growing mushrooms 2:30-4:30 p.m. on March 14. The cost is \$25. Participants will come away with a log for growing mushrooms at home.

For more information or to register: www.civicgardencenter.org, www.civicgardencenter.org or call 513-221-0981.



Zoom

Provided / Rebecca Webb

Billy Webb inspects shiitake mushrooms growing on a log at his farm in Salt Lick, Ky.



Zoom

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Shiitakes have a distinct cap and creamy white underside.

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