

## GREEN INVESTMENT — old style

### Morels—Breakfast of Champignons

In early May several people spoke to me about their plans to search out Morel mushrooms. I've been on the lookout for these at our place, without success, for several years. I've recently learned that I knew less about morels than I thought. Let me explain.

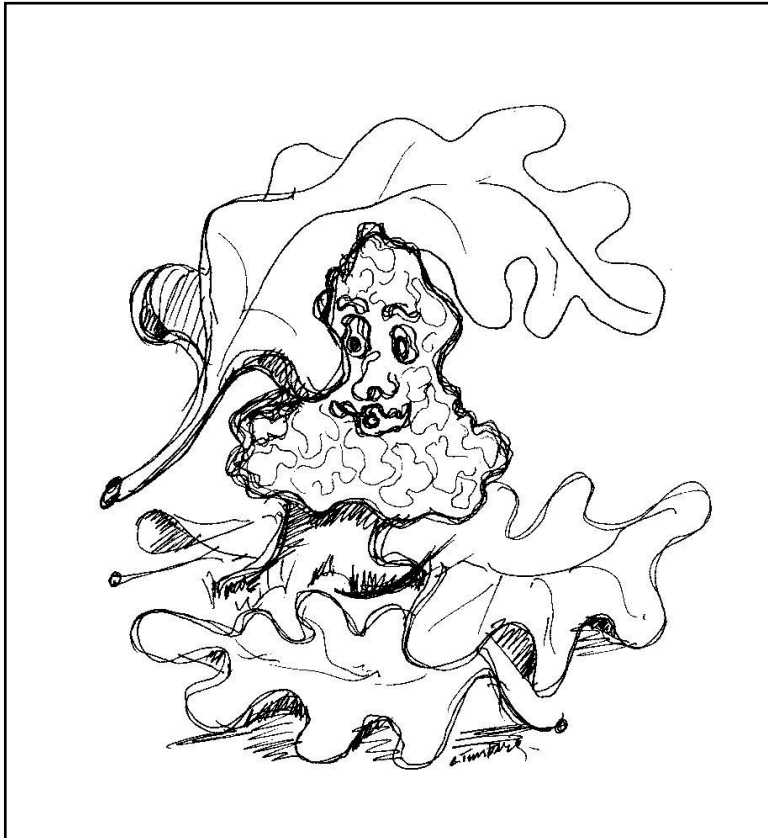
Over twenty years ago our family lived in Yellowknife and we had a simple cottage at a nearby lake. Late one summer the surrounding boreal forest caught fire. The jack pine woodland was heavily burned and the ground surface scorched to bare earth. We returned in spring to a scene of blackened trunks, a thick carpet of ash and a sea of morels. Knowing this pattern only too well, wildland firefighters, who know the location on all previous burns, supplement their seasonal income by gathering sacks of morels. Setting aside the enthusiasm of the hunt let me provide some further background. Their shape resembles a miniature Christmas tree with a rutted/pitted texture of brain-like folds. When cooked they add a rich flavour and a meaty texture to a meal. As with many mushrooms these have a poisonous lookalike—'brain morels'. So select the Christmas-tree form and not the brain-on-a-stick one. That choice is your basic 'no-brainer' and not a truffling matter.

Now living in the County, we've collected several kinds of edible mushrooms from our woodlot but as of yet, no morels. I've been looking for them each spring under the pine trees which is where, with my former experience, I expected them to be. Perplexing - a morel quandary! Having not found any I decided it was time to set aside past experience and do some research. Well, it turns out that morels in south eastern Canada behave differently than their northwestern cousins. Armed with new knowledge, I altered my search strategy...look in early May after prolonged rain—check—; search around the rotting stumps of decayed hardwoods—check—; explore the edges of stream-side ravines—check; look care-

fully for scattered individuals among dry fallen leaves—check. This refined search pattern resulted in-no morels! I did manage to collect some rusting metal, old tires, paint cans and broken bottles which had long ago been dumped into our ravine. Well, I haven't given up but there's always next year.

Botanically-speaking they are not mushrooms at all but rather Ascomycetes—a related family. However, just like mushrooms they are the fruiting part of a large subterranean web. (Think of it as an inverted apple tree). They decompose organic matter and thereby release nutrients back into the soil. Their favoured hosts are the roots of elm, ash, poplar and apple. Their root web sets its fruit in May growing through the layer of last years fallen leaves. While common, grocery store mushrooms like oyster and portobello can be grown artificially in sawdust and straw, morels only grow wild in old forests.....which contributes to their delicacy status.

One other thing I learned is that the vast underground root-web tends to gather buried toxins in the fruiting (eating) part. So, although you might find them growing in an abandoned apple orchard there is a risk that the arsenic-based sprays that were historically used on apple trees could remain in the soils and then be concentrated in the fruit. This got me to thinking...maybe along with the glass, rubber, plastic and scrap metal in the ravine there might be some discarded waste oil, farm sprays and lead paint in the soil. How lucky was I to not find any morels! If I did I might not be writing today! Rationalization is a key strategy in the optimists toolbox...to remain optimistic!



*If one morel is a fung-i would several be considered a fung-us?*

- By Robin Reilly

At their Black River Forest Garden, the Reilly's raise many types of plants and animals within a larger project to restore a diverse meadow and forest landscape.

