FUNGAL FUTURES



A new era of human-fungi relations is dawning. Peter McCoy wants you to join the revolution.

TEXT
Mark Mann

PHOTOS
Rebecca Stumpf

Ever since Peter McCoy became fascinated with fungi as a teenager, one mystery has preoccupied him. Why have fungi been so neglected—and even reviled—in Western culture?

"The lack of awareness and the blind spot, culturally, is immeasurable," he told me recently, speaking on the phone from his mycology lab and experimental fungi farm in Portland, Oregon.

A sought-after teacher and the author of two books on applied mycology, McCoy's inexhaustible fascination for all things fungal has, over the past two decades, elevated him to an influential position among mushroom enthusiasts. But while interest in mushroom foraging and cultivation has increased in recent years, this development is still young compared to the chasm of ignorance and disregard that has swallowed fungi for centuries.

The British mycologist David Hawksworth sounded the alarm in a 2009 paper titled "Mycology: a Neglected Megascience." Fungi play an essential role in many vital earth processes, he writes, from soil and forest health to sequestering carbon through decomposition. Our food systems depend on fungi, and many of our medicines are derived from them. Yet their importance has been terminally under-recognized and their potential under-studied.

Hawksworth's paper resonated powerfully for McCoy, who by that point had already spent nearly a decade combatting the stigma surrounding mushrooms.

McCoy, now 38, is a natural autodidact and avid gardener who first started growing mushrooms in his bedroom in high school. After graduating, he moved to New York City, where he got involved in environmental activism and the anti-waste movement. Though inspired by those communities, he was surprised not only by their disinterest in the power of fungi to improve ecosystems and break down waste, but also by the outright fear and scoffing that he sometimes encountered at the time.

Mycophobia, McCoy was starting to realize, is as pervasive as our society's avoidance of death. "Even the origin of the word 'fungus' denotes this morbid association, coming as it does from the Latin *funus* (corpse) and *ago* (I make)," he writes.







He returned to the West Coast to attend school in Olympia, Washington, and there he finally found a network of mycology enthusiasts who shared his interests, not just for foraging and growing mushrooms but also for the political implications of studying fungi, such as how human societies might emulate fungal forms of organization. He began channelling his ideas into a self-published zine called *Radical Mycology*, which, to his astonishment, soon found an audience of thousands around the world.

In 2011 he launched the Radical Mycology Convergence event, a gathering of mostly amateur mycologists and complete newbies, along with a handful of experts. The first conference focused on mycoremediation, the practice of using fungi to remediate polluted environments.

"People said it changed their life," he says. "That was the big pivot point for me." From that moment on, McCoy adopted a more public mission and dedicated his life to educating and inspiring a new generation of what he calls "myco-revolutionaries."

McCoy's approach to fungi is all-encompassing and hands-on, as evidenced by his 2016 book *Radical Mycology: A Treatise on Seeing and Working with Fungi*. It is a tome of epic scope at nearly 700 pages, divided into 12 chapters and more than 200 subsections, plus extended species profiles and additional informative appendices. The topics covered range from the highly philosophical to the fine-grained and practical: regenerative mushroom farming, fungal plastics, fermentation, lichen chemistry, psychoactive fungi, the fungal origins of life on earth, and many, many more. It is a full-spectrum resource for seemingly every imaginable form of human-fungal engagement.

McCoy, who speaks about fungi with the same encyclopedic zeal with which he writes, followed this book six years later with *The Mycocultural Revolution*, a shorter and more accessible entry into the world of applied mycology and theory. "In mycology, we need all kinds of amateurs," he tells me. "We need everybody at every level, all participating."

For McCoy, the DIY skills are gateways to a deeper transformation. "Fungi can help an individual see the world differently and see themself differently," he says. "It changes how you feel about things and the way you experience nature … You start to develop a mycelial-type mind—you see the connectedness of different topics and sciences."

McCoy is planning bigger and bolder moves to facilitate a collective co-evolution in human-fungal relations. He operates a demonstration and research space in Portland, Oregon, where he designs educational materials and equipment for his mycology school, Mycologos. Initially, he offered a single online course, but he is now in the process of developing 15 new classes.

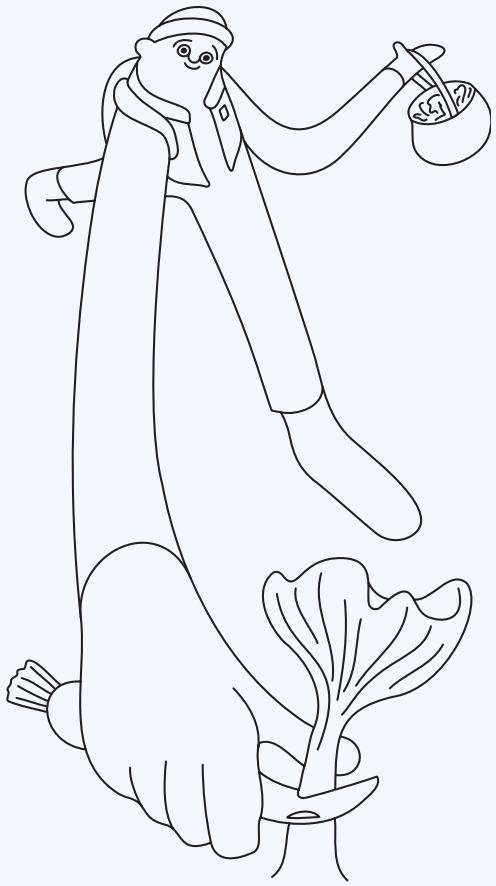
For McCoy, the bottom line is getting as many people interested and engaged with fungi as possible, in whatever ways suit them best. "There's so much to be explored, so much to be uncovered," he says. "So anything that anybody does in this arena, any contribution they make, is not only welcome but needed."

MARK MANN is a staff writer and an Associate Editor-in-Chief at BESIDE. He has published essays, profiles, and investigative reports in the *Globe and Mail*, the *Toronto Star*, *Toronto Life*, *The Walrus*, and others.

REBECCA STUMPF is an American editorial photographer based in western Montana. Her visual stories explore the connection between humans and nature, and the creative space that falls between the two. She enjoys growing her own food and hiking the Montana hills with her two dogs.

JOIN THE REVOLUTION

Here are **five ways to deepen your relationship with fungi**, start reaping their benefits, and contribute to the great fungal awakening.



FORAGING

"Since the earliest civilizations, the most direct path to forming a personal relationship with fungi has been through the gathering of wild mushrooms," writes McCoy in *The Mycocultural Revolution.* Not sure how to get started? Find a local mushroom club and go out with people who know what they're doing. Always rely on experts to validate your IDs—mistakes can be deadly!

FERMENTATION

Homemade tempeh, miso, sourdough, even mushroom mead: there are many delicious ways to bring these beneficial gut microbiota into your life. "It's another level of fermentation," McCoy says. "You get incredible flavour that you don't get through lactic acid bacteria. The umami goes through the roof."

CULTIVATION

Growing mushrooms at home isn't harder than any fermentation hobby, says McCoy: "The one skill to rule them all is fungal cultivation. Once you can isolate pure mycelium and propagate that out on other substances cleanly, you open a whole world of possibilities."

SELF-CARE

"Developing a personal practice for engaging with the healing benefits of mushrooms and other fungi … is among the most potent forms of self-care I have encountered," McCoy writes. The simplest way is to cook and eat healthful species like shiitake, maitake, turkey tail, lion's mane, and others.

APPRECIATION

"Fungi have been here forever, and they do so much that nothing else does in the environment," says McCoy. "Why not be thankful for that and have a degree of reverence, respect, and awareness?" ▪