

Zahradníček's blog for English speaking students

Part twenty one: A cep, or a toadstool?

If there exist an activity that can be considered typical for Czechs more than for any other nation in the World, it is probably mushroom picking. Especially between June and October, but some experts even in the remaining part of the year, thousands of Czechs come to the woods to pick mushrooms. It is hobby of many people, and for some of them rather lifestyle than just a hobby; walking in the nature and picking mushrooms.

Many foreigners would say: but isn't it dangerous? Everyone knows that some mushrooms are poisonous, and even that often some edible mushrooms resemble their poisonous relatives.

Well, other nations also have hobbies that might be considered dangerous. Austrians or Swiss people like mountain climbing; isn't this often dangerous? Or eating the *fugu* fish in Japan – the one that may be very dangerous, if not prepared carefully enough?

In some countries, people use to buy mushrooms, especially *button mushrooms*, in stores, to prepare food. Of course, you can buy them also in Czechia, but for majority of Czechs (in both Bohemia and Moravia) it would be a degradation, if they would be told to *buy* mushrooms; they rather *pick* them. Sometimes they even pick relatives of *button mushrooms*, edible species of *Agaricus* genus, which are quite common in some forests or meadows, including the Moravian Karst and other countryside around Brno.

Nevertheless, the most popular mushroom in Czechia is *Boletus*, also known as *cep* or *porcino* in English. One of reasons is that these mushrooms can be only be mistaken for some not edible, but still not seriously poisonous species. They are prepared in many ways, in soups, special meals, or they are dried and then used in winter period.

On the other hand, some poisonous mushrooms are also popular. People cannot eat them, but they are so nice-looking, that they take place in many illustrations to books for children or animated movies. Of course, we are mostly speaking about the toadstool. Positive effect of this that everyone knows that toadstools are poisonous. On the other hand, there exist poisonous mushrooms much more dangerous than the toadstool. The most poisonous mushroom in Czechia is it the same genus as the toadstool (*Amanita muscaria*). It is *Amanita phalloides* or *the death cap* – already 30 grams (half of a cap) are estimated to be enough to kill a human. Good luck, it has a typical large volve (base) that alerts mushroom pickers, or at least majority of them. – On the other hand, surprisingly, the same genus *Amanita* also contains some edible and even quite valued species; of course, picking them means to know them well and to differentiate them from poisonous species.

The Czech nature includes also interesting mushrooms. For example, *Coprinus atramentosus*, is usually estimated to be a poisonous mushroom – but in fact, it is only poisonous for people drinking alcohol. It contains a chemical compound similar to disulfiram, a drug used for the treatment of alcohol abuse. There exist also mushrooms searched by illicit drug abusers (especially the psilocybin mushrooms), but to use these mushrooms is extremely risky, as the amount of the given hallucinogen in certain fruit is very variable and so the same amount may have a week effect once and a killing effect next time.

But mushroom picking is not just about mushrooms. In fact, it is a way how to spend time in the nature, surrounded by green trees, fresh air and singing birds. On the other hand, if you really think about picking mushrooms, it is recommended to go together with somebody who is experienced and can help you. There exist books with picture, or even applications for smartphones, but if you do not know the particular signs typical for particular species, you can be mistaken. It is also possible to bring your picked mushrooms to an advisory, but the mushrooms have to be fresh and complete, that means, the base should not be cut out. In any case, there exist a useful and life saving motto: "if you are not sure what it is, don't pick it".