Smelly mushrooms

Foul smelling mushrooms are popping up in many Okaloosa County landscapes. As a result, today I'll share with you a shortened article I wrote a number of years ago on this topic.

Stinkhorns are mushrooms that smell like rotted meat. It's their putrid odor that motivates residents to seek advice on control measures. But with the exception of the objectionable smell, stinkhorns are really not a problem.

Mushrooms are the reproductive part of a fungus. They grow from fine root-like structures called mycellia, which normally go unseen. Mycellia can live for years in wood, living tissue or the soil.

The stinkhorn fungus is a decomposer and is considered beneficial because it helps breakdown decaying plant material. Dr. Gary Simone, former UF/IFAS Extension Plant Pathologist says, "Their ecological niche is one of composting grass, straw, wood chips or similar organic matter on the soil surface."

Our environment provides a perfect home for mushroom-producing fungi. Northwest Florida receives around sixty-two inches of rain each year. Plus we have high humidity and warm, mild temperatures most of the year. And we have a wealth of decaying plant material. This all adds up to fungi heaven.

Stinkhorn fungi start as white, egg-like structures that are anchored to the soil by a root-like network. Only the top of the egg-like structure can be seen. Most of the "egg" is underground.

Simone says, "The egg-like structure contains a fully formed, miniature adult that is ready to expand to adult size upon the availability of water." It may only take an hour or so from the egg-rupturing stage to the mature mushroom. Based on the type of stinkhorn, the fruiting structure (mushroom) will be stalk-like or globular, lattice-like in shape. Mushrooms vary in color but most are pink to orange. They also vary from two to a little over six inches in height and from one-half to three inches in width. All possess foul odors.

Various insects, including flies, are attracted to the scent of stinkhorn mushrooms. Flies feed on the spore slime. After dining, they depart and transport spores for this fungus to other locations.

Simone says, "Stinkhorn fungi do not cause disease, in spite of their occurrence near declining trees and shrubs." Their colonies may extend in all directions around the visible mushroom and they persist for a number of years until their food source is exhausted.

Most people tell me the mushrooms are growing in areas where they have used
wood mulch. Mushrooms from the stinkhorn fungus are produced during cool, moist weather (fall through spring).

Simone offers the following stinkhorn management options.

Learn to live with them as they are beneficial to the soil ecology in Florida. Keep windows closed during periods of mushroom production to minimize the odor problem.

Hand-pick the "egg" stage before it ruptures and put it in a zipper bag in the garbage. Small or new colonies may be eradicated through complete removal of mulch to the depth of the native soil. No guarantees with this method.

Use of non-mulch ground covers, such as ivy, jasmine, liriope, mondo grass, etc., will serve to reduce stinkhorn incidence in a landscape. Distance large mulched areas away from the house. There are no legal, effective, practical chemical control options.

Larry Williams
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