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Rainy Month Results in a Bumper Mushroom Crop

By Irina Titova

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When brought home, mushrooms should be cleaned as soon as possible. **Vladimir Filonov**

St. Petersburg — This fall, Russian mushroomers are enjoying a bumper crop of the beloved fungi. Happy hunters have been returning from local forests with baskets brimming with ceps, red-cap boletes, birch boletes and chanterelles. Some say this year Russia is enjoying its best mushroom season in half a century.

Russians' love of mushroom picking seems to be an inborn trait, equal to the passion for their sport felt by fishermen or hunters.

"It's so much fun to find a cep or a red-cap bolete!" said Dasha Dorozhkina, 12, who regularly goes mushroom picking with her parents.

"And I love the competition for who finds more mushrooms," she said.

Her mother Alla Dorozhkina said she also appreciated the opportunity "to combine

mushroom picking with a walk around the forest."

Perhaps surprisingly, not all those who enjoy mushrooming like to eat what they find, preferring the sport over the actual taste.

For Russians, the tsar of all local mushrooms is the cep. Ceps grow in pine forests, and their brown caps and thick stems make them look like the kings of the mushroom world. They are usually enjoyed fried with potatoes, or made into a mushroom soup.

Ceps, red-cap boletes and birch boletes are also hung out to dry or frozen to be enjoyed later in the year. Other types of mushrooms, such as gruzdi (milk mushrooms) are best for pickling or salting.

The height of the mushroom season is the end of August, though it usually begins in late July and ends in early October, when the first frosts arrive. Mushrooms grow best after several days of rain have soaked the ground, followed by warm and sunny weather.

Most Russians follow certain rules regarding mushroom picking such as gathering mushrooms in the morning rather than later in the day, and the use of a wicker basket to carry the mushrooms rather than a plastic bag, where the delicate flesh tend to spoil much more quickly.

Experts advise that mushrooms be harvested by cutting near the root to preserve their root system and avoid too much soil finding its way into the basket. They also advise that it is better to choose only young mushrooms that have not yet been attacked by worms. When brought home, mushrooms should be cleaned as soon as possible, peeled when necessary, and cooked or dried for the winter. The longer mushrooms stay uncooked, the faster they deteriorate.

As popular a pastime as mushroom picking is, it may also be an extremely dangerous one, with poisoning and losing one's way in the forest very real threats that must be taken seriously.

The problem is that while some poisonous mushrooms obviously look like toadstools, others may appear dangerously similar to the edible variety. Therefore the first rule by which a mushroom picker must live is to never pick even vaguely unusual looking mushrooms.

The most dangerous poisonous mushroom is the death cap. Its ingestion is almost always fatal as it severely affects the kidneys and liver, experts say. There are also hallucinogenic mushrooms that can cause serious disorientation.

So far this month, local doctors have already registered a number of instances of mushroom poisoning, including one deadly case that claimed the life of an elderly man.

Doctors say those most vulnerable to mushroom poisoning are children, the elderly and migrant workers who come from other countries. Migrant workers are at particular risk because they are unfamiliar with local vegetation. Children and the elderly are weaker physically than healthy adults, and as a result succumb more quickly to the effects of poisoning.

Another danger that plagues mushroom hunters is the risk of getting lost in the forest. This season alone, more than 340 people have gone missing in the forests of the Leningrad region, according to reports by regional emergency services.

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