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Red Wine Cap Mushrooms Good For Beginners

Homegrown mushrooms are a delicacy, and few people get the chance to try them firsthand. While the intimidating aspect discourages many gardeners, mushrooms are easier to grow than many vegetables. Even better, a well-established patch will produce for years, and you can select varieties that rarely appear in grocery stores. Red wine caps are an ideal starter—they're nutrient-rich and among the easiest varieties to cultivate at home.

Red wine caps have a subtle, earthy flavor but are most notable for soaking up sauces and other flavors, especially when used with garlic or red wine. They're a great source of protein, making up 25% to 34% of dry weight, along with vitamins B and C, and essential minerals like potassium, phosphorus, calcium, manganese, copper, sodium, iron, zinc, magnesium and selenium.

Unlike other culinary mushrooms, red wine caps aren't picky about their growing substrate. You can inoculate spores on a mixture of agricultural waste, including shredded corn cobs, straw, and both hard and soft wood chips, instead of the hardwood that other varieties require. It's common for gardeners to plant them along mulched garden paths with established perennials, as the spores need some contact with microflora.

Preparing a mushroom bed requires spawn from a reputable supplier, usually sold in bags of sawdust. Expect a 5-lb. bag to cover about 25 sq. ft. You'll spread them within a blend of planting materials; clean straw and woodcchips work well together. Look for fresh-cut "green" chips, as decay indicates existing fungi, but that's hardly a dealbreaker because the red wine caps are a vigorous variety likely to outcompete it.

Soak the planting material for 24 hrs., then let it drain for several more hours. Meanwhile, clear the site of tall weeds and water it well. Cover the soil with an inch of the pre-soaked mixture, and sprinkle handfuls of mushroom spawn on top. Cover with two inches of presoaked material, then water thoroughly before adding more spawn.

Continue this cycle until the mushroom spawn is gone, then cover the bed with a clear plastic sheet. Secure the edges to lock in moisture and leave the bed undisturbed for a month. Then, lift a corner and carefully dig through the wood chips for evidence of white, threadlike growth, called mycelium. If none is present, add more water and leave the sheet undisturbed for several more weeks. Once mycelium appears, remove the plastic and keep the bed moist but not oversaturated.

The timing of the harvest depends on several factors, including planting depth, the type of planting mix, outside temperature and rainfall. A higher concentration of straw helps the mycelium grow faster, leading to quicker mushroom harvests, although production may end sooner. Wood chips, on the other hand, take longer to establish but can produce multiple flushes of mushrooms once they're ready.

Either way, mushrooms typically appear within a few months to a year. Watch for clusters of red lumps, as this indicates a future harvest. The mushrooms initially emerge with burgundy caps on white stems. As they mature, the red caps enlarge and open, leaving a fleshy, ridged ring on the stem.

Red wine caps are best when harvested small, before the caps have opened. Use a sharp knife to slice them as close to the ground as possible. Alternatively, you can twist and pull the mushrooms from the ground, provided you slice off the stem butt and replant it within the bed to encourage more growth.

The mushrooms will likely spread beyond their original borders, so consider their location carefully. To keep the harvest coming, it's best to recharge the bed every few years with additional straw and wood chips.

Wine Cap Mushroom Sawdust Spawn can be purchased from retailers like North Spore (www.northspore.com), where it sells for around $30 for 5 1/2 lbs.

Feverfew thrives in full sun. While loamy soil is best, the plants aren't fussy and bloom from July through October in most growing zones.

Feverfew Has Many Benefits

Feverfew, a Victorian garden staple, has found a home in medicine cabinets for centuries. It's related to the chrysanthemum and goes by many names, including bachelor's buttons, featherfew, midsummer daisy and bride's button. With small, daisy-like white flowers on ferny foliage, cut flower enthusiasts love using feverfew both fresh and dried.

Originally native to southeastern Europe, feverfew now grows across Europe, North America and Australia. It's a hardy, drought-tolerant perennial throughout USDA zones 5 to 8 and beloved by insects, especially bees. Deer leave it alone, which may be due to the plant's distinct bitter odor, which some compare to citrus.

Feverfew has shown scientific evidence for improving a range of health conditions, including headaches, arthritis and labor complications. Almost every part of the plant can be used, except for its roots. Applied topically, feverfew can provide relief from itching. Most health benefits are associated with the compound parthenolide, which seems to reduce inflammation and potentially restrict cancer cell growth. But, despite its name, the plant's not ideal for treating fevers.

Sow feverfew seeds outdoors either in late fall or up to six weeks before the expected last frost. For indoor planting, aim for ten weeks before the frost date. Sprouts should emerge within 15 days. Light helps germination, so gently press the seeds into the soil's surface.

Feverfew thrives in full sun. While loamy soil is best, the plants aren't fussy. It blooms from July through October in most growing zones, with regular deadheading. It's an avid reseeder, nearly invasive in the right environment, so give feverfew plenty of space to spread out.

Goldenseal Offers Woodland Profit Potential

For woodland entrepreneurs, goldenseal demands attention. With a range that spreads across eastern North America, the plant is known as yellow root, ground raspberry, yellow puccoon, and its Latin name, Hydrastis canadensis.

Goldenseal roots contain the chemical berberine, which is responsible for their distinctive yellow color. It's useful as a dye but also contains medicinal properties. Berberine works well for digestive problems and as a topical balm for skin and ear infections.

As word of its benefits spread, the elusive plant became prized. Intensive harvesting and habitat degradation led to its near extinction in the early 1900s. Renewed interest in herbal medicine in the 1970s helped its numbers bounce back to "vulnerable to extinction," a classification it still carries today across most of its range.

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Forest farming—using natural or modified forest habitat space to grow or produce commercially valuable non-timber forest products—offers ways for goldenseal enthusiasts to access the plant without threatening its existence. While goldenseal is classified as medicinal, other forest products might be edible or decorative.

Goldenseal thrives in rich, moist soil with slight acidity. Sugar maples are a positive sign of suitable habitat space, as their leaves provide plenty of calcium when they break down. Oak leaves, in contrast, are high in tannins and break down poorly. Even so, goldenseal is considered hardy and can thrive in a variety of locations.

Forest farming typically falls into two categories: wild-simulated and wood-cultivated. Wild-simulated goldenseal requires little more than scattering seed and monitoring its growth. The resulting plants are nearly identical to those found in nature. While this approach requires less labor, it produces relatively low yields and follows a harvest cycle of 7 to 10 years.

In contrast, wood cultivation combines traditional agriculture with forestry. Standard practices include thinning seedlings, tilling soil into raised beds, and clearing competing vegetation. This method is more labor-intensive and disturbs the natural ecosystem, but it results in higher yields in less time.

There are three main strategies for propagating goldenseal: by rhizome, seed or root. Rhizome propagation requires digging in the fall, preferably from 5 to 7-year-old plants with a flower or berry. Divide the rhizomes into 1/2-inch segments, making sure each has a bud. Plant them 2 to 3 in. deep with the bud facing upward.

Goldenseal fruit ripens in late summer, although it should be harvested early to beat out hungry turkeys. Mash the fruit, freeing the seeds, and sow immediately. This is crucial, as goldenseal requires a 30-day warm stratification period. Otherwise, the seeds might go dormant for several summers. Plant about 3/4 in. deep, covered with soil and leaf litter.

Seeds go through three stages to maturity: seedling, development and reproductive. They remain seedlings until they develop a single leaf and stem, which can take upwards of two years. They'll stay within the development stage until they develop a forked stem and two leaves, usually around the five-year mark. Though this method is slow, it increases genetic diversity rather than merely creating clones.

The third, less popular strategy is propagating goldenseal by the roots that grow along the rhizome. Again, you'll want to cut portions about 1/2 in. long and plant them. This strategy might take two years or longer for plants to develop.

The roots are ready for harvest between 4 and 8 years old. Harvest in late summer through fall to ensure the plant energy is traveling through to the roots. Leaves are less seasonally dependent for harvesting, although spring is preferred for the highest concentration of active compounds, like berberine. Immediately after harvesting, spray the roots with cool water through a mesh screen. This helps protect them from water pressure that could scrape up the delicate roots.

Dry the roots at around 85 to 100 F, ensuring good airflow. Too hot, and the outside might dry before the interior, increasing the risk of mold. Within a week, the roots should lose 70% of their weight. Expect to fetch around $20 to $50 per lb. of dried root, although the price increases when the roots are sold in value-added products, like tinctures. Likewise, many growers find success selling seeds or fresh roots to other interested herbalists.