



Friday's Feature

By

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Mushrooms creating a stink

Something is creating quite a stink in local landscapes. The odor is coming mostly from shrub and flower beds, but in some cases from the lawn. But, what's causing it?

The putrid smell that is permeating our landscapes is coming from a saprophytic fungus called a stinkhorn. The stinkhorns are mushroom look-alikes. Most of them are fleshy, brightly colored and emit an offensive odor, much like decaying flesh.

The stinkhorn fungus is a decomposer. It helps to break down organic materials that are high in cellulose, such as the organic mulch we use in our flower beds. Woody debris left over from recent hurricanes has added to the potential food for this fungus. It loves to grow in wood chips, sawdust, dead roots, stumps and other high cellulose containing materials.

Stinkhorns tend to pop-up suddenly. They start as egg-like structures that are attached to the ground by long, root-like strands. Most of the egg is underground. This egg-like structure contains a fully formed, miniature adult. When enough water becomes available, the adult stinkhorn will emerge from the egg. It may take only an hour from the egg-rupturing stage to the mature stinkhorn fungus.

There are many different types of stinkhorns. They range in shape from tall and columnar to globular. They can range in color from pink to orange. They can vary in size

from two inches to six inches tall. But they all emit a foul odor.



The "egg" stage of stinkhorns

The unforgettable odor comes from the spore mass of the fungus. The odor functions as an attractant to flies that feed on the spore slime. After dining, these insects depart with their legs and other body parts covered with spores which they disseminate throughout the environment.

Stinkhorns are natural residents of Florida, but may also be easily introduced with mulch material. Even when the fungus is actively growing in certain areas, the mushrooms do not occur constantly, appearing for several weeks once or twice per year. They usually appear during periods of cool, moist weather. So homeowners who are being grossed out by the odor can take heart in the fact that they are seasonal.

There is no safe chemical control that can be recommended, so if relief is necessary only cultural methods can be used. First look around to see if you are providing a food source for the fungus. Remove sawdust piles, dead roots and underground stumps if feasible. This fungus particularly likes fresh hardwood chips and it grows and fruits profusely when this material is used as mulch.

Sometimes it is most practical to simply remove the mushrooms as they occur. Hand-pick the “egg” stage before it ruptures and put it in a zipper bag in the garbage.

But, if you can tolerate the smell, learn to live with stinkhorns. They are beneficial organisms to the soil ecology in Florida. Keep your windows closed during periods of mushroom production to minimize the odor problem.

Theresa Friday is the Residential Horticulture Extension Agent for Santa Rosa County. The use of trade names, if used in this article, is solely for the purpose of providing specific information. It is not a guarantee, warranty, or endorsement of the product name(s) and does not signify that they are approved to the exclusion of others.



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