

OUTDOORS

The spring magic of morels

Rain and warm combine for scores of spores

BY HEATHER JOHNSON DUROCHER

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Spring just wouldn't be the same for Lester Barnes if he didn't hunt for morels — an annual tradition for the Mesick resident that began in his childhood.

"I'm 71 years old and I probably started when I was 6 or 7, when I could walk around in the woods," Barnes said.

This year's no exception for Barnes, who begins searching for the desirable fungus following the first warm rain of the season. He and wife Barbara sometimes take along family members, including three grown children and grandchildren ages 9 and 12.

"It's an excellent outing for a family," said Lester, who is serving as chairman of this year's Mesick Mushroom Festival, scheduled for May 7-9.

Indeed, hunting morels is big-time fun for many folks. Getting out into nature following the long winter months is one of the reasons numerous people flock to the forests in search of this tasty treat.

"It's just an enjoyable pastime in early spring, getting out in the woods," said Jerry Douglas, a longtime morel hunter who serves on the organizing committee for Boyne City's Morel Mushroom Festival, slated for May 13-16.

The air is cool and crisp, the sun is (hopefully) shining and, what's more, "The bugs aren't out yet," said

Douglas, who enjoys taking his two children, ages 10 and 14, along with him.

The "gourmet flavor" — not to mention the fact that morels are rare — also lures people to the activity, Douglas said.

Upscale restaurants, both local and in metropolitan areas, boast on their menus meals featuring morels.

The morel season is fairly short, generally beginning mid-April and running through mid-May. They're visible when the ground stays moist, Douglas said.

"The season starts as soon as the nights get to be about 40 degrees," he said.

Whether you've hunted morels in years past or are



planning your first jaunt into the woods, area morel aficionados offer these tips to make the experience as fun — and successful — as possible:

■ Develop an eye for morels by reading up on the fungus or taking a class, such as a free one

offered during the Boyne City festival.

■ Consider other forest growth. "Most of the (ground) cover at this time of year is horizontal. Not much is growing," Douglas explained. "So you look for something that is vertical."

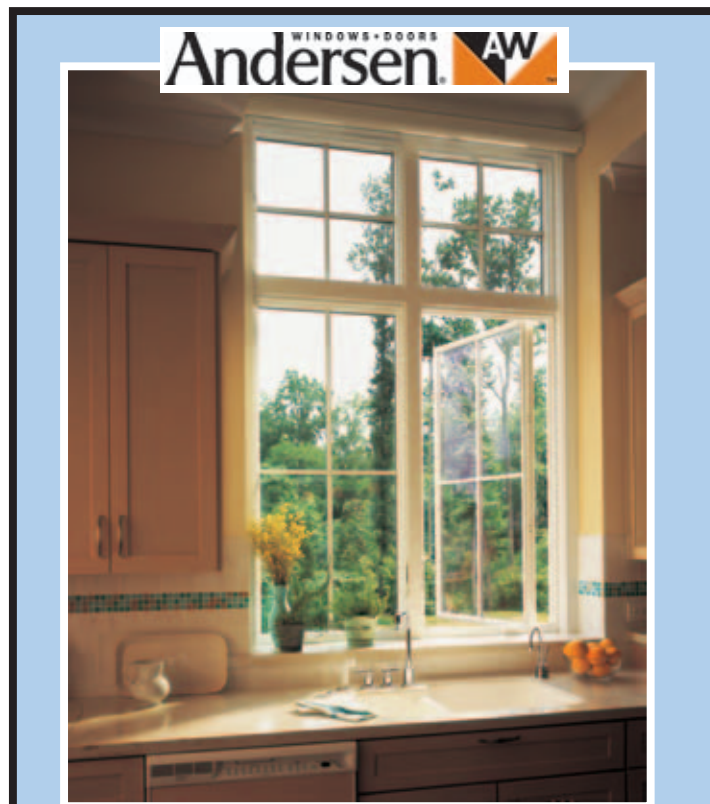
Black morels are visible first, with the white variety showing up later in the season. Searching near certain trees is helpful: "My favorite place to look is

around the white ash tree, especially around the beginning of the season," Barnes said.

■ Look ahead. "You don't want to look directly down at your feet, but a dozen feet ahead of you because they are so closely blended into the ground that it's hard to pick them out when you're

staring right down at the ground," Barnes said

■ Know your mushroom. A true morel grows directly out of the stem, meaning the cap is directly connected to the stem. A false one, meanwhile, has a cap that "hangs like a skirt," Douglas said. Never eat an unidentified mushroom or morel.



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