

## Fly Agaric by Rebecca Lexa

As you enjoy the fall weather, keep your eyes open for a bright red mushroom with white spots. This is fly agaric, a member of the infamous *Amanita* genus. You may have seen fly agaric in fairy tale illustrations as the classic “toadstool”, but it also makes appearances in pop culture ranging from the Smurfs to Super Mario Brothers.

If you look on the underside of the flat red cap, you’ll see closely spaced white gills. The stipe, or stem, of the mushroom often has a ring of tissue around it, the remnant of its protective veil. Fly agaric is always found near trees, with which it has a symbiotic relationship; most *Amanita* species lost their ability to break down cellulose in rotting wood, so they need living trees to share nutrients with them. In this area it is partial to pines, cedars and spruces.

Toxins in its flesh give fly agaric its name, as traditionally they were used in remedies to kill flies. Farmers in Slovenia would soak one of the mushroom caps in milk or water, which allowed the fungus to release its toxic compounds into the fluid; heat was sometimes used to speed up the process. Flies that then drank the resulting fluid would die.

Like other *Amanita* mushrooms, fly agaric is very toxic to humans. While it is not as deadly as its cousin the Destroying Angel mushroom, ingestion can still cause significant gastrointestinal distress, fatigue, and in severe cases seizures and comas; headaches and amnesia may persist even after the initial poisoning.

So appreciate this beautiful red mushroom with your eyes and cameras only!