



## Foray close to home

Shiitake, oyster, morel... it's mushroom heaven these days and now you can grow your own. On a log. **Brian Pedley reports**

Situated in the open country that lies to the east of Hull, Adrian Ogden's laboratory is so secret that it does not exist on any map. Housed in a former Royal Air Force station, its interior walls are clad in white plastic to protect Petri dishes of tissue samples against contamination. The air, maintained at a constant 24C (75.2F), is changed and filtered 12 times every hour. Not a single micro-organism exists here without Ogden's permission. Through the translucent plastic curtain of the "growing room" the setting sun emits a weird coppery glow. Beyond it, hang 6ft columns of desiccated, pasteurised straw, from which sprout living entities that grow pink and soft, like human ears.

"They're oyster mushrooms," says Ogden. "It's how we test their vigour. From just one square centimetre of tissue, we can produce a ton of material."

Since starting his own mushroom farm in 1998, the 31-year-old mycologist has used his laboratory to plot the next big thing in fungi, scouring the woods of Yorkshire and beyond for samples of wild species that could be "cloned" for commercial use.

A rural business was literally spawned in 2002 when Ogden contacted Peter Watson, a forestry consultant, in search of logs to use as growing media. The men joined forces with a shared mission to pervade the patios and back yards of Britain with the woody tang of gourmet mushrooms that people have cultivated themselves. Home growers simply gather piles of cut logs, drill holes, insert tiny wooden dowels that have been treated with mushroom spawn, seal the holes with wax, keep it all moist — and wait a few months for the crop to flourish. Customers of Gourmet Woodland Mushrooms include not just domestic growers, hoteliers and restaurateurs, but also farmers and smallholders seeking to establish their own mushroom farms.

"We think it's the first time that a mycologist and forester have got together like this," Watson says. "One of the problems that we have in forestry is that the value of timber is so low. The prices are actually lower than they were in 1976. It seemed a perfect solution for using low-grade timber to create an income."

The collaboration was a true meeting of minds. "My mushrooms normally grow in chopped straw — but you're limited to growing two or three varieties," Ogden says. "For commercial reasons and for my own interest, I wanted to expand my range of cultivation."

From its base near Pickering, on the southern edge of the North York Moors, the company delivers the raw material and printed guide to

enable anyone to grow the kind of exotic mushroom species that usually command double-digit prices on restaurant menus. Of the 5,000 mushroom varieties that grow wild in Britain, the firm has so far found 14 that are viable for inoculating into logs. They include chicken-of-the-woods, with the texture of chicken breast; hen-of-the-woods, highly prized for its succulent leaves; the tiny orange winter mushroom; and varieties of the large, flat-capped, fast-growing oyster mushroom. Another variety, artist's conk, does duty as a medicinal infusion. The firm believes its kits are a good alternative to the autumnal plunder of woodlands by over-enthusiastic fungus foragers.

"A lot of habitats have been destroyed by collecting wild mushrooms because there is no replacement planting," says 45-year-old Watson. "We are reproducing wild mushrooms from extremely small samples — so we can help to save species from overpicking."

Ogden and Watson do not restrict themselves entirely to native British species. The shiitake mushroom, for example, prized by chefs for its smokey flavour and meaty texture, is indigenous to the forests of China. Now, shiitake cells cheerfully divide in their temperature-controlled home-from-home in Hull's rural hinterland before being shipped in wood dowels to eager British growers.

"Growing mushrooms out of timber is a traditional system of farming that has been practised in the Orient for 500 years," says Ogden. "China originated mushroom cultivation on logs. What we do is combine these traditional techniques with the technology of the laboratory, under the same roof. It's what makes us different."

"Mushrooms are the premier recyclers of the planet," Ogden says. "We've even grown them on old copies of *Yellow Pages*. The speed of growth depends on the variety. You just treat it as a shade-loving plant."

The company is currently trialling crops of the rare morel mushroom grown on charcoal, with a view to commercial supply later this year.

The latest creation of Ogden's laboratory will be available in the spring. The mini-biome, which recently won a Department of Industry Innovation Award, enables cooks to grow winter mushrooms in the fridge.

"Fungi will grow in domestic fridges — as most students will tell you," says Watson. "But we believe we are the first to use the domestic fridge to grow food."

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Main picture: Adrian Ogden (right) and Peter Watson stacking logs after plugging them with dowels inoculated with fungi spores. Above from top: oyster mushrooms, winter mushrooms and chicken-of-the-woods