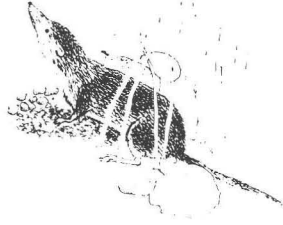


The Other Ingredient

What forester hasn't been stopped in his tracks by the appalling smell of stinkhorn fungi (*Phallus impudicus*)? The common name itself is ancient, going back at least as far as 1724 — "This is known to all our country people by the name of stinkhorn".

Stinkhorns, which are associated with rotting wood, show themselves among the leaf litter as two, commonly three, egg-size growths, which are attached to the substrate by a cord-like strand of mycellium. These 'eggs' are either white or pink; they are edible and are considered an aphrodisiac by some. Indeed the sticky jelly that is responsible for the foetid smell is also edible and quite sweet!



One 'egg' develops more rapidly than the others, the skin splits and the familiar shape of the stinkhorn grows upwards before your eyes. This indeed is hardly an exaggeration. The common stinkhorn can grow a full 15 centimetres in less than two hours. Tropical stinkhorns have been known to grow several centimetres in one minute. It is no surprise then that these fungi were treated with respect and seen as mysterious and magical and many forest folk in the past were filled with fear on coming across these in the half gloom of a deep forest.

The common stinkhorn can reach up to 25 centimetres when fully grown. It then becomes liquified and gives off its familiar overpowering smell that is often mistaken for the smell of putrid meat. This smell, which comes from a dark olive slime, is a powerful attractant to flies. Flies feed on the slime in which the fungal spores are imbedded. Spores stick to the feet and bodies of the flies and by such means are dispersed throughout the forest. Indeed at such times fly droppings can be made up entirely of spores of the stinkhorn. The Dog Stinkhorn (*Mutinus caninus*), a much smaller species, is less common and is not edible.

In an old work on the subject the foetid smell of stinkhorns was described by one scientist as being similar to the smell of wild violets. However, with the passing of time, others came to the opinion that the man in question suffered from a defect of the nose!