

Mushroom maniacs gather for fair

City Museum features fungi

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SANTA CRUZ — Mushroom maniacs and toadstool-testers came out of the closet — or the woods, as the case may be — Saturday as the much-beloved Fungus Fair returned.

The 14th annual fair combines attributes that are definitely Santa Cruz. Foggy, damp weather that helps in the proliferation of mushrooms and thousands of fungal specimens, identified and displayed in their natural habitat.

The fair, which concludes today at the Santa Cruz City Museum, was not held last year because of lack of rain, resulting in a lack of enough wild mushrooms. This year, however, it's a different story. And boletivores and fungophiles (mushroom experts) are having a field day.

The City Museum has been turned into a woodland wonderland. Museum Curator John Anderson estimated there are more than 200 different species and several thousand mushrooms on display.

Almost as many people are expected over the three days of the fair, added Anderson.

The fair was crowded Saturday. Visitors waited politely to get to a display where they were able to closely examine specimens and studiously read the information cards. Others, like Pete Hosea of Santa Cruz, was busy sampling the cream-of-chantarelle soup.

As always, garnering a lot of close inspection were the deadly poisonous mushrooms. The bright red Fly Agaric (*Amanita muscaria*) possibly was the most spectacular, but the Death Cap or Death Angel mushroom (*Amanita phalloides*) is said to be the most dangerous locally.

The latter, for example, was responsible for Santa Cruz County's last mushroom-related death. A Watsonville man died in

1981 just six days after eating a single Death Cap.

Much of the discussion at the fair involved the recent poisoning of two men in Alameda, who ate Death Caps. One has already received a liver transplant, while the other is awaiting a donor.

Ed Aguilar, president of the Fungus Federation of Santa Cruz — a mushroom club — said the Death Cap and the Coccora or "prince" mushroom that the men thought they were picking, are similar.

The Death Cap, which is abundant locally, has the classic mushroom shape. It is distinguished by a large, bulb-like cap just below the soil-line. It has a loose skirt under the top cap. The mushroom itself is white, and can range between two and eight inches in diameter.

Aguilar noted that the men "had a mushroom-identification book with them.

"But, that's like having a gun with no bullets if you don't have the knowledge of the book," he added.

Local mushroom expert David Arora recommended that persons should never pick wild mushrooms indiscriminately or go picking alone. He said they should become affiliated with a mushroom group and "arm themselves with knowledge."

According to Arora, "Once you know your mushrooms, it's as easy to distinguish poisonous types as it is to tell vegetables apart."

Russell Kokx, a first-time visitor to the fair and veteran mushroom-picker, agreed. He maintained he doesn't worry about picking and eating poisonous types because he knows what they look like.

"It's like learning the name of a tree or plant," Kokx said. "You either know it or not. I don't worry about it. If I have any doubts, I throw it out."

Other categories of mush-



Dan Coyro/Sentinel

Louise Nevs of Santa Cruz examines a fanciful exhibit at Fungus Faire.

rooms on display included look-alikes, rare varieties and those found in different locations, such as freeway and wood-inhabiting species.

Other features were displays on mushroom-growing, mushroom dyes and mushroom photography. There were sauteed mushrooms and soups to taste. "Fungal favorites" will be tasted at 3 p.m. today.

Scheduled for noon will be "What's My Mushroom?" featuring features experts vying to outwit each other in identifying mushrooms. At press time, there was no truth to the rumor that Arlene Francis would make an appearance.

The fair runs until 5 p.m. today. The museum is located at 1305 East Cliff Drive. Admission is \$2 general and \$1 for seniors and those under age 12.



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Expert Ed Aguilar displays Death Cap, left, and lookalike Cocorra mushroom.