

## Species of the Week



### Fly Agaric

#### *Amanita muscaria*

Autumn is a great time for mushrooms and toadstools. The fly agaric has to be the most recognisable toadstool in the world with its large red cap and white flecks. Fly agaric generally sprouts between August and November. It is found on acidic soils in woodland and is most frequently associated with birch although it can be seen among other broad-leaved trees and conifers. It is widespread and common.

Fly agaric is a poisonous and psychoactive fungus and is related to lethal fungi such as the aptly named death cap. Despite the fact eating fly agaric has caused deaths it has been eaten by various cultures for religious purposes for thousands of years due to its hallucinogenic properties. In Siberia shamans would enter a trance state by eating fly agaric or alternatively (for health reason probably) they would achieve trance by prolonged drumming and dancing. In this trance-like state the shamans would fly into the world of their gods, battle with demons and obtain fantastic visions. In eastern Siberia, the shaman would take the mushrooms, and others would drink his urine (Seriously). Some sources have claimed that the Vikings would eat fly agaric in order to enter their berserker rages although no contemporary sources mention this tradition.

Images of fly agaric are common throughout popular culture. They are often associated with gnomes, fairies and witchcraft. Several references to fly agaric are found in popular literature. The mushroom that caused Alice to change size in the 1865 popular story *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* were inspired by fly agaric. More recently they are known from the video game series *Super Mario Bros*.

Warning: Eating wild mushrooms and toadstools can have fatal consequences. If you want to try some wild mushrooms please buy them from a farmers market or take part in an excursion organised by an expert.