HEEP hosts afternoon of edible fungi finds

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A University of Connecticut sign points to the Nature Trail in the Hillside Environmental Education Park (HEEP). The event on Friday, Oct. 30, 2026 featured a guide to deciphering mushroom identification.

PHOTOGRAPH BY MATHIEU PINTO, GRAB PHOTOGRAPHER/THE DAILY CAMPUS

An educational excursion focused on mushroom identification was held at the University of Connecticut's Hillside Environmental Education Park on Friday.

The walk was held by the Connecticut State Museum of Natural History. It was the final event held at UConn for "Walktober," an initiative led by the nonprofit environmental organization, The Last Green Valley.

The walk was led by Karen Monger, a professional forager and active member of different mycological organizations. Monger's expertise focused on the basics of identifying mushrooms, especially for consumption.

Monger said her appreciation for mushrooms stemmed from wanting to forage for edible species, which her husband already practiced.

"We started out just wanting to know what we could eat without dying," Monger said. "And then slowing down, you'll start being like 'these are really pretty, these are really beautiful.' So there is an evolution of why you want to get into foraging and what your end goal is."

Before the walking began, Monger provided a handout with terminology and visual indicators to look out for on mushrooms. She said this time of year can be less fruitful for finding mushrooms, especially when there's a lack of rain.

Monger said hunting for mushrooms can be cost-friendly, as all that's needed is a knife, a basket to hold harvested finds and potentially a magnifying glass. But she stressed that eating mushrooms adds an element of risk that requires precise identification, which means it's often best to practice with experienced foragers.

"The only generalization you can make about mushroom identification is that there are no generalizations you can make about mushroom identification, especially if you want to eat a mushroom," Monger said. "There are absolutely deadly poisonous mushrooms here in the Northeast, along with our wonderful, delicious, edible gourmet mushrooms."

Monger passed around some mushrooms found near the start of the trail for participants to hold and smell. One specimen included an Amanita citrina, an inedible cream-colored mushroom that smelled like raw potatoes. She pointed out the characteristics that helped her identify the mushrooms, which included their gill appearance, smell, the forest type they were found in and the trees the mushrooms grew on.

Afterwards, Monger took the group on the main pathway through HEEP. As the pack moved forward, individuals split off to find mushrooms of their own to share with Monger and everyone else.

One stop revealed a handful of mushroom species growing on a cut tree stump. Most of the mushrooms were flat and looked similar at first glance, but their undersides revealed a different story. For example, Monger went over the colorful turkey tail mushroom, whose underside is filled with many tiny pores, which differs from the false turkey tail mushroom, which has a smooth underside without pores.

Even though Monger removed the entire visible mushroom body, she said it does not kill the organism. Instead, she said the mushroom body is just the fruiting portion of a root-like network below called mycelium, which is the main part of the organism.

Monger found examples of some of the most recognizable edible mushrooms. These included chicken of the woods, which is bright orange when it's best to harvest, and edible puffball mushrooms, which can typically be eaten when their insides are completely white. She emphasized that while some mushrooms may be considered edible, it may not mean they're worth eating. And because of chitin in mushroom cell walls, she said all edible mushrooms must be cooked so your stomach can digest them.

"Edible does not mean incredible," Monger said. "Edible does not even necessarily mean palatable. I say edible simply means they're non-toxic."

Along the walk, the group found mushrooms with unique features, even if they weren't edible. One such find was a horsehoof mushroom, which has been used by humans to hold smoldering coal to start new fires for thousands of years.

Declan Farrell, a first-semester graduate student studying psychology who came with his girlfriend who forages mushrooms, said the horsehoof mushroom was the most interesting part of the walk.

"It was cool learning about how before there were matches and lighters, they'd use that mushroom to store burning coal to preserve their fire," Farrell said. "I thought that was cool, the brining history into it and the utilitarian aspect of nature."

At the end of the walk, Monger said that while all the information required to identify mushrooms can be overwhelming, it's a skill that can be built with practice.

"So go outside, look at your mushrooms, pick them up, don't be scared," Monger said. "Look at them, smell them and bring them back home. Send as much time with your mushrooms as you can, and eventually, all that science-y stuff will stick, I promise you."

Andrius Dagilis, a professor in UConn's Ecology and Evolutionary Biology Department, who studies the population genetics of organisms such as fungi, said he appreciated how people learning about mushrooms and sharing their knowledge can help scientists with research.

"They're being the naturalists that Darwin and Wallace and all the others were being," Dagilis said. "They're helping out the professional scientists by sending stuff that we can work with for data... and know more about distribution and timing."



Professional forager Karen Monger speaks to a group in the Hillside Environmental Education Park (HEEP) and shares the basics of mushroom identification on Friday, Oct. 30, 2026.

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