

What Is Growing in My Mulch?

Like other organic matter, wood and bark decompose over time. The primary organisms involved with their composition are bacteria and fungi which derive their energy for growth from the carbon-based compounds found in wood and bark. These compounds include cellulose, lignin, and simple sugars. Bacteria are microscopic organisms that are not visible in the mulch. Fungi also may be microscopic, but many develop visible reproductive structures.

The fungi involved in the decomposition of landscape mulches are natural components of the environment. Some fungi, such as artillery fungus, are "recyclers" and break down woody tissue directly. Other fungi, such as slime molds, consume bacteria and other organisms living in the mulch. These fungi are not harmful to landscape plants and no known health hazards are associated with them unless they are eaten. They can be found April through October, usually following rainy weather.

Mushrooms

Many different species of fungi produce fruiting bodies called mushrooms.

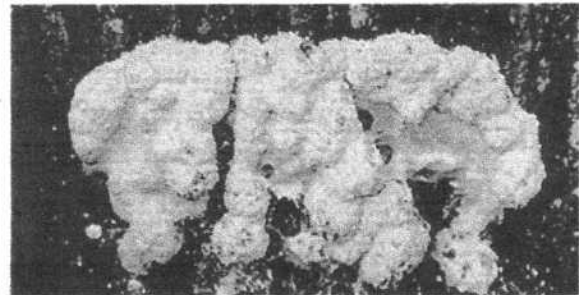
Common Names Mushrooms, Toadstools

Scientific Names Many different fungi produce mushrooms.

What Do They Look Like? They come in various colors, shapes, and sizes ranging from less than an inch to several inches tall. Some are soft and fleshy and disappear soon after they emerge; others remain in the mulch for a few days, weeks, or entire growing season.

Are They A Problem? Generally not. They are not harmful to the surrounding plant material, but some may be poisonous if eaten.

What Should Be Done? Appreciate their beauty; ignore them; or remove them.



Slime Molds

Common Names Slime Molds, "Dog Vomit" Fungus (nice thought huh?)

Scientific Names species of Physarum, Fuligo, & Stemonitis

What Do They Look Like? They start as brightly colored (yellow, orange, etc.) slimy masses that are several inches to more than a foot across. They produce many, tiny, dark spores. These molds dry out and turn brown, eventually appearing as a white, dry, powdery mass.

Are They A Problem? No. These fungi are "feeding" on bacteria growing in the mulch. They are normally a temporary nuisance confined to a small area.

What Should Be Done? The fungus may be left in place to decompose. If its appearance is offensive, discard the fruiting bodies into the garbage or compost pile.