

Ephemera: Notes from the farm

by [Terra Brockman](#) in the [June 24, 2015](#) issue



PHOTO BY TERRA BROCKMAN. A shiitake mushroom blooms in central Illinois.

Of all the signs of spring, the morel mushroom is arguably the most ephemeral and enigmatic. Perhaps this is why morel mania descends for a week or two each spring, as people disappear into the woods, hoping to emerge with hats, caps, and sacks full of the elusive mushrooms.

I've never found any morels in the woods around my house, but that's mostly due to lack of time for searching. This year I had more time, and so each day for almost a week, I tramped through the woods, eyes scanning the forest floor for the distinctive Christmas tree shape of a dull tan morel poking up through last year's maple and oak leaves.

As I scanned the ground, I also scanned my brain for morel lore. Loamy moist soil, but not too wet. Disturbed ground is best—flooded areas or burn sites. Look on the south slope of hills. Or is it the north? Wait until the nighttime temperatures are in the 50s and the days in the 60s. Today it's almost 80—is that too hot?

I searched the ground, and my brain, but to no avail.

During the week, everyone from my car mechanic to my cabinetmaker had advice. I knew enough not to ask them to share a favorite spot, but I did learn that morels like to hang around certain trees. Some people say ash, or wild cherry, or cottonwood, sycamore, and apple. But everyone agreed that the tree morels love best is elm. Dead elms are, apparently, morel magnets. But even better than a dead elm is a

dying elm—one with most of its bark still on, according to my source, but with few if any leaves.

The next day I went out mushroom hunting again, this time with my niece. We looked both in my woods and in my parents' woods. We even bushwhacked along the pasture fence where Grandpa found them years ago. We found live elms and dead elms. We even found some wild strawberry plants. But no morels. We consoled ourselves that it had gotten too hot too fast—and much too dry. Probably not a good year for morels at all.

That evening, heavy battleship clouds came sailing in from the west about an hour before dark. The shower passed quickly and turned the earth an even more vivid green as the evening sun slanted through the trees, transforming the drops hanging from each leaf into jewels more precious than jewels. After dark the rain came in earnest, wave upon wave.

Then the electricity cut out, as it tends to do during thunderstorms where I live. I sat a while in the soft darkness, listening to the rain.

When the electricity didn't come back on, I got up to gather candles and matches. I lit seven votives on the coffee table, their flickering, personable light keeping me company. The rain pattered conversationally on my roof, and I followed it in my mind as it fell on the rich soil down in the fields. I imagined all the baby lettuces, radishes, spinach, and onions luxuriating in the shower, their leaves happy and their roots happier. The plants drink their fill, and the rest of the rainwater is pulled down into the subsoil where it will remain as a reservoir for the dry months ahead.

Listening to the rain, I recalled Thomas Merton doing the same and writing: "I listen because it reminds me again and again that the whole world runs by rhythms I have not yet learned to recognize."

And I recalled that a few days ago, as I was scanning the earth under the big white oak, looking for morels, a loud voice almost directly overhead, asked, "Whooo, whooo, who cooks for you?" There she was, in the middle of a branch, looking down at me looking up at her. I said hello and she fluffed her feathers, and asked again, "Soooo, whooo cooks for youuuu?" Then she launched herself on the warm air and sailed silently down into the woods below.

And then I realized that in my search for morels, I had found:

- one barred owl
- grass growing inside an old bottle
- violets
- spring beauties
- poison ivy
- more trillium than I've seen in my whole life
- the first ivory flowers of mayapples, peeking shyly from under their green umbrellas
- a piece of a deer's hip bone, so decalcified that it looked like a sponge
- shiitake mushrooms blooming on logs where I had inserted shiitake mycelium 13 years ago—logs now nearly turned to dust
- a snail happily dining on a shiitake mushroom

I stopped for each of these, and spent long moments in quiet awe, which the rhythm of the rain last night told me was what I was really after.