

## GWCT Jess Brooks' Species of the Month

### Devil's fingers

One of the things I look forward to every autumn is the eruption of fungi from tree stumps, woodland floors and damp grasslands, picking the occasional parasol or field mushroom to go in the frying pan. The species I have chosen this month, however, is probably not one that you look at and think, 'Mmm, tasty'. You're more likely to wonder: will that leap off the ground and latch on to my face, à la Alien?

Introducing the devil's fingers fungus (*Clathrus archeri*), also known as the octopus stinkhorn or the Squidward mushroom. Found between July and October, this spectacular species can be found in just a few southern localities in the UK and favours moist, shaded areas of wood chips, leaf litter and rough grassland.



Devil's fingers is a member of the stinkhorn family, but it looks nothing like our native stinkhorns when mature. It can reach 15cm tall when its red-clasped branches first emerge, before they open and arch back to the ground. The inside surface of each of these 4-8 branches is lacy and coated in a dark, sticky goo, which looks rather like clotting blood. This substance is called gleba, and it contains the spores for reproduction. The majority of fungi rely on wind or rain splash for dispersing spores, but the stinkhorns have developed an animal dispersal system whereby the gleba emits a pungent, rotting odour, which attracts insects such as bluebottle flies, and the spores are carried away on their legs to colonise new sites.

This fungus does not aim to endear, so it won't surprise you to learn that it emerges from the soil in a sinister fashion. When ready to 'fruit', the fungus network stretches up to the soil surface and develops into a translucent, gelatinous, egg-shaped structure with the fingers forming inside. When ready to release the spores, the fingers 'hatch' slowly out of the egg in a bunch, before unfurling back on themselves into the octopus-like form. If you're feeling brave, you can watch the hatching process below.

### Devil's Fingers Hatching

The immature egg stage of the fungus is technically edible, though in the words of a mycologist (fungi expert) who tried it, "its flavour and texture is disagreeable". I don't suppose his curiosity stretched far enough to try the tentacles.

Devil's fingers is alien in more than one sense of the word – in description, but also in distribution, for it does not belong here in the UK. It has spread to many other countries in the world from its native Australia and New Zealand through contaminated nursery stock and in plant products. It is thought to have arrived in Europe with war supplies such as wood and wool in the early 1900s, and it can be reliably found in certain hotspots in the New Forest in Hampshire, where military bases were established in 1940s.

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All in all, this species is a fascinating and otherworldly addition to our native fungi. If your usual haunted castle tour or fright-night is cancelled this year, perhaps you could take a walk through the New Forest this Halloween!

Jess Brooks  
Advisory

Photo credit: Bernard Spragg

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