COMMON NAME

Dead man's fingers

HOW BIG IS IT?
An individual fruiting body is 3–8cm (1¼–3in) tall, and 4cm (1½in) wide.

WHERE'S IT FROM?
Europe and North America, but technically it can pop up anywhere.

WHAT'S ITS NATURAL HABITAT?
Deciduous forests and woodland, usually in the base of rotted and damaged tree stumps.

HOW DOES IT REPRODUCE?
Spores are spread by flies or dispersed into the air.

CAN I GROW IT AT HOME?
Not easily – and it can infect trees, with little warning, causing black root rot.

Unlike the alien plants in *The Day of the Triffids*, someone should write a movie one day about real plants and fungi that are just as terrifying. And there's none more worthy of playing a starring role than *Xylaria polymorpha*. Go off track in the forest at the wrong time of year and you might spot some blackened fingers clawing their way up from the forest floor. Don't panic, though, it's only a fungus trying to live its best life.

Xylaria polymorpha can appear in many handlike forms, from chubby to skinny, and with or without all five fingers. It's positively ghastly. This fungus has a cosmopolitan distribution, which means that, given the

THE CREEPIEST OF ALL FUNGI

Xylaria polymorpha

LATIN NAME

right habitat, dead man's fingers can appear just about anywhere in the world, including your back garden. In fact, the threadlike structures of the fungi, called *hyphae,* can spread vast distances underground and are quite difficult to detect. They could be right under your feet and you wouldn't even know it.

Plants versus fungi

Now, I wouldn't wrap your knuckles if you referred to *Xylaria* as a plant. I'm not like that. But fungi are not really plants at all. They differ in many ways – and not only in their otherworldly appearance. Plants grow by using sunlight, carbon dioxide, and water in a process called photosynthesis. Plants also have chlorophyll, which gives them the green colour we know so well.

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Fungi appear rather different. They grow mostly out of sight and are formed of networks of hyphae that, as a whole, are referred to as a "mycelium".

Some fungi make spores – tiny, reproductive cells that can give rise to a new individual without any sexual happenings; unlike plants, which need a bit of jiggy. Mushrooms are the fruiting body of the fungus and their job is to distribute those spores.

A rotten diet

But back to the *Xylaria*, which feeds on decaying matter. We call that "saprobic" and it's almost like a public recycling service. The fungus breaks down dead organic matter into energy for the fungus, at the same time providing plants with the nutrients they need. To do this, dead man's fingers can sprout from the base of rotting stumps, in bark lesions, and even from the stalks of decaying herbaceous plants.

The fungus can invade damaged roots too, leading to root rot and bringing about the death of the plant. So, sadly, despite being a curiosity, the presence of the fungus is an indicator of a tree with a problem, although apple trees have been known to produce one final crop before they die.

The fungus is also occasionally found living in and among termite mounds. It's thought that the termites take the spores back inside the mound stuck to their bodies. When the termites eventually die, the fungus gobbles up the partially digested materials they leave behind.

Changing appearance

In the course of its lifetime, *Xylaria polymorpha* takes on lots of different guises (*polymorpha* means "having many forms" in Latin). Young dead man's fingers are pale with white tips. In summer, they begin to blacken and, by late autumn (coinciding neatly with Halloween), they're brown to black and embedded with spores. At this point, they are actually quite hard to spot among dark woodland – until they reach up behind you and scare the heck out of you, that is!

The fingers can last a year and keep releasing spores into the surrounding area, just waiting for the wind and the rain – as well as flies – to take the spores on their onward journey to a rustic growing spot.

HOW CURIOUS

The fungus prefers rotting elm, maple, beech, and apple trees. Once it has taken hold, the trees can collapse and fall without warning.