

Cute as buttons

What is short, stumpy, has a big head and is kept in the dark? No, it's not your boss. Well, not necessarily. The answer, of course, is a mushroom. So you won't need a boardroom to cultivate these vegetables. You just need a cupboard, laundry, garage or garden shed.

You can grow mushrooms even if you live in a unit that has no balcony. One mushroom kit will have you picking mushrooms in three to five weeks from the date of purchase, and you will keep picking for about eight weeks. When the kit has finished, you can use the contents to fertilise your garden or indoor plants.

Mushrooms are good for you. They are cholesterol-free, have virtually no fat or sodium, contain some B vitamins (especially niacin and riboflavin) and are good sources of dietary fibre. They can be used raw or cooked in a wide variety of dishes.

According to the Australian Mushroom Growers Association, mushrooms are the second most valuable fresh vegetable crop grown in Australia after potatoes. More than 85 per cent of our households purchase fresh mushrooms regularly.

The mushroom industry is the ultimate recycler. The nutrient-rich medium in which the fungi are grown is made from stable bedding, wheat, straw, poultry litter and other organic materials. The finished waste is sold as garden mulch.

Australia's first commercial mushroom

crop was grown in 1933 in raised beds covered in straw and hessian bags in open fields. And the first large indoor growing house was the railway tunnel between Circular Quay and St James stations on Sydney's City Circle railway line before it was completed.

While there's a wide variety of cultivated mushrooms available today in Australia, you can also pick wild mushrooms – as long as you know what you're doing. I often make the pilgrimage with friends at this time of year to the pine forests near Oberon in NSW to pick slippery jacks and saffron milk caps. We quickly discovered that the taste of wild mushrooms is much richer and stronger than that of cultivated varieties.

Use wild mushrooms in cooking in the same way as cultivated types. Bake them whole or simply throw them into a risotto with some parsley. But don't eat wild mushrooms unless you can identify them accurately, as fatal poisoning can occur.

The most popular and frequently eaten mushroom in Australia is *Agaricus bisporus*, the variety available from the supermarket as buttons, cups and flats, and also in mushroom kits for home growers. (Niche market mushrooms such as oyster, shiitake and straw mushrooms are not available in kits.)

Homegrown mushrooms can be harvested at different stages. Button mushrooms (also called champignons)



Fun with fungi: mushroom kits turn even non-gardeners into primary producers.

can be picked when they are very young, at which stage their delicate flavour makes them perfect for eating raw, in pastas or crumbed. If picked at the next stage, when they are just starting to open and they have a deeper colour and flavour, they are great for stir-fries and casseroles. For the most intense mushroom taste, allow them to mature and cook them whole or slice and pan-fry them with parsley and garlic.

Are mushroom kits cost-effective? In optimum conditions a mushroom kit can produce four to six kilograms. A kit costs \$15 to \$17 and supermarket mushrooms cost about \$6 a kilo. So once you have harvested about 2.5 kilos, the kit has paid for itself and from then on you will save money. In

addition, you have the convenience of having them on hand.

Mushroom kits come with instructions, pasteurised compost pre-seeded with mushroom spawn, and casing. With a kit, you don't even have to be a gardener to get it right.

Clippings

- Buy mushroom kits from your local nursery or visit www.bmhharvest.com.au or www.mushroomkit.com.au.
- Pick bunches of oregano, marjoram and thyme and dry them for winter use.
- Plant leek seedlings for winter steews.
- Autumn is the time to move plants that will do better in more suitable positions.
- Plant trees and shrubs now. The autumn soil is still warm enough for them to settle in before cold weather arrives.