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Down the rabbit hole: Denver decriminalizes 'magic mushrooms' – a type that grows wild in Washington

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In a result surprising to many, Denver voters have chosen to decriminalize psychedelic mushrooms – the kind coined the “magic mushroom” because of its naturally occurring hallucinogen psilocybin.

The mushrooms grow in the wild throughout Washington, especially on the wetter west side of the state. But be forewarned: They can be difficult to distinguish from poisonous varieties.

Jim Johnson, Central Washington University biological sciences professor and chair, said he did not think the Denver measure would pass. The tally was very close: It wasn't until Wednesday afternoon that election officials determined the initiative had been approved with 50.6% of the vote.

Johnson is a mycologist, specifically studying fungi.

“I'm a little surprised (it was approved) because there have been some adverse health things that have been linked, although not always conclusively, to consumption of hallucinogenic mushrooms,” Johnson said.

There has been research into the medicinal benefits of psilocybin, including in the treatment of depression and anxiety in patients dealing with life-threatening cancer. Dr. Ira Byock, founder and chief medical officer of the Providence St. Joseph Health Institute for Human Caring in Torrance, California, published a peer-reviewed paper in the *Journal of Palliative Medicine* analyzing various research regarding psychedelics.

“(Psilocybin) has strong and durable benefits for some patients with treatment-resistant depression, and for those with demoralization, anxiety, and depression associated with terminal illness,” Byock wrote.

Regardless of psilocybin's purported efficacy, the substance is illegal in Washington and is a controlled substance under federal law. Magic mushrooms do not appear to be a law enforcement problem in this area. Spokane made one

arrest in 2019, and none in 2018, said Terry Preuninger, Spokane police spokesman. The field tests cannot detect mushrooms; the substance can only be identified through lab work if an arrest is made.

Magic mushrooms grow wild in Washington, Johnson said.

“It depends really where you are. So in certain areas, particularly on the west side of the mountains, they’re more abundant. On the east side, they’re a little bit rarer just because of climatic conditions,” Johnson said.

Johnson issued a strong warning: Don’t go looking for these mushrooms.

“It’s a really bad idea for people to be out looking for magic mushrooms on their own if they don’t have a fair amount of expertise, just because there are a lot of little brown mushrooms, some of which are very, very poisonous.”

A prominent writer and educator apparently had a similar thought, but his solution was to forage alongside a psychedelic mushroom expert. In a June 4 article in *The Atlantic* magazine, Michael Pollan recounted meeting up with Paul Stamets, mycologist and Fungi Perfecti owner.

Fungi Perfecti’s website describes the company as “family-owned business dedicated to promoting the cultivation of high quality gourmet and medicinal mushrooms.”

Pollan and Stamets went on the search in an undisclosed location, though Pollan did write, “What I can say is that there are three public parks bordering the wide-open mouth of the Columbia – Fort Stevens, Cape Disappointment and the Lewis and Clark National Historical Park – and we stayed at one of them.”

The duo found quite a few mushrooms, but did not try them out. Pollan ended up partaking with his wife, Judith, later on, and he elucidated his experience in the article.

“As I gazed at the two trees I had gazed at so many times before from my desk, it suddenly dawned on me that these trees were – obviously! – my parents: the stolid ash my father, the elegant oak my mother,” Pollan wrote. “I don’t know exactly what I mean by that, except that thinking about those trees became identical to thinking about my parents.”

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