

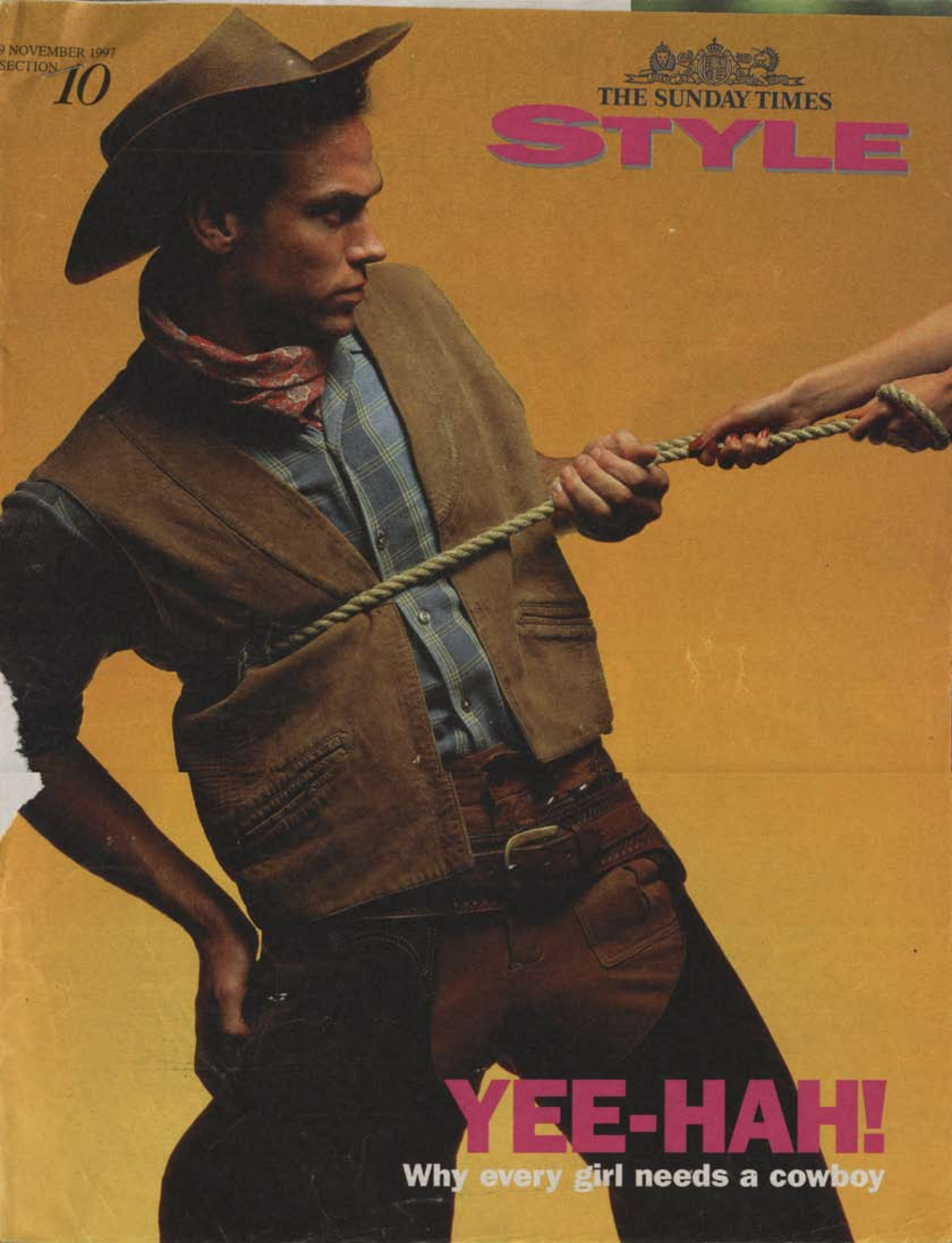
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SECTION

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THE SUNDAY TIMES

# STYLE



# YEE-HAH!

Why every girl needs a cowboy



Fungi business: the edible *Laccaria amethystea*, main picture, and *Lepista nuda*, right; not for eating — *Piptoporus betulinus*, far right



# FUNGUS, THE BOGEYMAN?

## GARDENING

*It may look like it comes from Mars, but that odd growth at the bottom of the garden could turn out to be tonight's supper, says ANDY STURGEON*

As you're clearing the deluge of autumn leaves from your garden, spare a thought for the fungi that could be lurking underneath. We're now entering winter, and although many mushrooms and toadstools will have disappeared with the onset of hard frosts, there are still stragglers to be found. Fungi in a garden are a mixed blessing. The parts we see are only the fruiting bodies that serve to spread the spores. The rest, a network of filaments called mycelium, which grows through the ground or wherever the fungus gains its nutrition, is usually too fine to be seen by the naked eye and it is this that can make unwanted fungi hard to get rid of. A familiar sight in many gardens is the fairy ring — the plague of the manicured lawn. Surprisingly little is known about these concentric rings of lush, green grass — the theory that they are caused by partying fairies went out of fashion in the 17th century. They are now known to be caused by *Marasmius oreades*, the fairy-ring champignon, the fruiting body of which stands up to 10cm tall and has a tan cap as much as 5cm across. It is edible, but should be avoided due to its similarity with the deadly *Clitocybe rivulosa*. Successful removal of the rings can only be achieved by excavating and replacing the turf and topsoil to a depth of 30cm.

This is nothing compared to the honey fungus, *Armillaria mellea* — probably the most frightening discovery a gardener can make. A dense network of long black cords, called rhizomorphs, give it its other name of bootlace fungus. This pernicious parasite spreads rapidly under the bark of trees and shrubs, on the roots and in the soil, like something from a Stephen King nightmare. It favours woody shrubs and trees, causing an intensive white rot, and death comes quickly. In severe cases, the only effective cure is to move house but, for lesser infestations, the infected plants should be removed and the soil drenched with Armillatox. The mushrooms, which themselves rarely spread the disease, appear from summer to early winter in dense clusters around the base of trees and stumps. They vary in colour from tawny to dark brown, with the strong smelling caps being anything from 3cm-15cm across.

Another fungus familiar to most gardeners is coral spot, *Nectria cinnabarina*, which appears as a rash of small, orange-red dots on the bark of dead wood in trees and shrubs. It is present throughout the year, but is particularly visible now that the leaves have fallen. Although attractive, if left it can become parasitic and enter the healthy tissue, so the infected branches should be removed to 10cm-15cm below the diseased area.

Something of a curiosity is the bracket fungus. This may be any one of a number of edible and inedible species that look like half a Frisbee embedded in the side of a tree trunk. One of the most common inedible types is the *Piptoporus betulinus*, which grows up to 20cm across. Its thick, white, rubbery flesh is found all year round on birch trunks.

Fungi aren't necessarily bad news, however. A more welcome garden guest is the wood blewitt, *Lepista nuda*. This more classically shaped mushroom bears a bluish lilac cap up to 12cm across on a thickish stem. This fades to a light brown with age, moving through the colours of a healing black eye. The thick flesh is strongly perfumed and considered excellent to eat. They are quite common and can be found in hedgerows and gardens from autumn to early winter.

A smaller, prettier species is the amethyst deceiver, *Laccaria amethystea*, so called because it is so variable and difficult to identify at first. The cap can be anything from 1cm-6cm across on a hollow stem up to 10cm tall and the gills beneath are thick and widely spaced. The magnificent purple colour fades to a pale lilac, tinged buff when older. I dry these edible mushrooms on the radiator and store them in jars ready to be tossed into soups and stews.

My father recently discovered a crop of common field mushrooms, *Agaricus campestris*, beneath an old apple tree in the garden. Although they are hardly a rival for Italian porcini, he has been happily munching away, much to the consternation of my mother. To reassure her, I checked that they were the real McCoy — although I didn't have the heart to tell him about the maggots I discovered in the overripe flesh. Stand the caps on paper before eating to allow time for any intruders to show themselves.

Like the agaricus, the season for many of the deadly poisonous fungi is now over; the ominously named death cap and the destroying angel appear only until the autumn. But even with familiar species, caution is essential. Before eating — or even handling — any fungus, you should familiarise yourself with the dangerous ones. Invest in an illustrated book and preferably ask someone experienced to guide you. A colleague I introduced to fungus forays soon became hooked and collected voraciously from the many gardens in his care. Several days into his new hobby he found himself in hospital within inches of his life. So be careful — stomach pumps are never fun.

● Andy Sturgeon's book for first-time gardeners, *Planted*, will be published next year by Hodder & Stoughton

● Dan Pearson is on holiday

## CUTTINGS

● On Thursday there will be a guided walk through the Royal Botanic Garden, Edinburgh, entitled *Naked Trees and Skeletons*. Tickets cost £8 and include afternoon tea. Call 0131-552 7171 for more details.

● Starting on Saturday and running until the following Sunday, the Ivy Festival at Castle Gardens, Sherborne, Dorset, will include talks, free help and advice on growing ivies, hundreds of which will be on display. Call 01935-814633 for more details.

● If you've been inspired to learn about fungi, next Sunday there's a chance to find out more. Mushroom Magic, a fungus foray through 200-year-old oak woodland at Croxeth Hall and Country Park in Liverpool, will let you identify up to 260 different species. The foray, which starts at 2.30pm, is open to all-comers and costs £2 for adults. Call 0151-228 5311 for more details.

● Not surprisingly, many British gardens have already closed for the season, so it is now a good time to visit nurseries with an eye to next year. Peter Beales is one of the country's leading rose growers, and his nursery at London Road, Attleborough, Norfolk, has a huge range on offer, with an especially fine selection of old roses. Call 01953-454707 for more details.

● One garden that is open all year is Overbecks Museum and Garden, Sharpitor, Salcombe, Devon. Its secluded position high above the Salcombe estuary has given it a Mediterranean-style microclimate and its steep terraces are home to a wide range of exotic plants such as agaves, myrtle trees, even fruiting banana palms (although not at this time of year). Call 01548-842893 for more details.

● I am interested in growing old varieties of fruit and vegetables. Where can I get hold of the relevant seeds?

The Henry Doubleday Research Association (HDRA) has produced a Victorian Seed Collection, which includes many 19th-century favourites, including 'Offenham' cabbages (1897) and 'Purple Cape' cauliflower (1834). The selection costs £9.99 and is available by mail order from the Organic Gardening Catalogue. Call 01932-253666 for more details.

**Robert Johnston**

● If you want to find particular garden accessories or services, write to *Cuttings*, Style Section, The Sunday Times, 1 Pennington Street, London E1 9XW