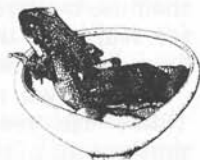


## FUNGI IN SCHOOLS

for  
CHILDREN  
TEACHERS  
PARENTS

and other  
interested parties



### BRACKETS ON TREES

Many old or dying birch trees have what looks like a small rounded shelf or bracket, 20-50 cm wide and 2-3 cm thick, projecting from the trunk (Fig. A); this is the Razor Strop Fungus (*Piptoporus betulinus*). If you can find one on a fallen tree you can have a closer look. The top is pale greyish-brown and the underside is white. On this lower side there are innumerable very small holes looking rather like tiny pin-pricks. Break or cut a small piece off the bracket and you will see two layers inside. The upper is white and either spongy or corky depending on the age of the bracket and the lower, also white, is a mass of narrow tubes about 2-8 cm long each with an open end. These are the 'holes' seen on the underside of the bracket. The spores of the fungus are formed inside these tubes and in that sense they are the equivalent of the gills that we saw on the underside of the cap of a mushroom.

The brackets last only one year. They begin to develop in the late summer and push through the bark looking like white rounded knobs about the size of a golf ball. It takes about six weeks for a knob to become a full sized bracket. The spawn, or mycelium, of the fungus is growing inside the birch tree where it causes a reddish-brown rot of the wood and the eventual death of the tree.

Brackets on birch trees are useful things and the common name indicates one use. Until the early part of the 19th century they were used for making strops for sharpening cutthroat razors. These would be strips about 15 x 5 x 2.5 cm nailed to wood with the pores (lower side) uppermost. The surface was hardened with siliceous earth. In the days before matches, when flint and steel were used to make fire, the fungus was used as a 'touch-wood'. The bracket smoulders very slowly and small pieces would be lighted, kept in a tin with restricted ventilation and used to light or renew a fire. This was a much easier method than making sparks by striking flint on steel. Entomologists also use very thin strips of the corky upper layer for mounting small insects. You can sometimes see these in museum displays.

There are many other bracket fungi; some larger, some smaller and in many different shapes and colours. A few are shown in the coloured plate. Fig. B. The Tinder Fungus, *Fomes fomentarius*, looks like a horse's hoof growing on birch or beech trees. These fruitbodies last for many years unlike the Razor Strop Fungus. Fig. C. The Weeping Polypore, *Inonotus dryadeus*, grows at the foot of oak trees. It is brownish yellow, thick and lumpy and droplets of liquid ooze from it in damp weather. Fig. D. The Blood-stained Bracket, *Daedaleopsis confragosa*, will turn red if pressed with a cautious finger. Look at the underside where the holes, or pores, are larger and more irregular in shape than in the other brackets described. Fig. E. The Giant Polypore, *Meripilus giganteus*, is difficult to miss. It forms large clumps up to ½ m or more. The pores, which are very small, turn blackish when bruised. Fig. F. Varicoloured Bracket *Coriolus versicolor* is a small, thin, leathery bracket semicircular in shape. It has a velvety top zoned in yellows, greens, greys and black; underneath it is white. It occurs often in great numbers on fallen logs and can be found the whole year.

Sheila M Francis

Next time: 'Make a slide'.



A. Razor Strop Fungus (*Piptoporus betulinus*); B. Tinder Fungus (*Fomes fomentarius*); C. Weeping Polypore (*Inonotus dryadeus*); D. Blood-stained Bracket (*Daedaleopsis confragosa*); E. Giant Polypore (*Meripilus giganteus*); F. Varicoloured Bracket (*Coriolus versicolor*). (BMS Slide Collection).