

Fairy rings

"There are fairies at the bottom of our garden."

—Rose Fyleman

Fairy rings are fungous infections of grass in lawns, in meadows and in wooded areas¹ (Figs. 1-3). They appear as circular or arcuate patterns, usually of a darker green colour than the surrounding unaffected grass. Fruiting bodies (or mushrooms) may form similar patterns at the periphery of the rings. Some of these rings may be as large as ½ mile in circumference and a ring of this size may be 200 years old. Smaller rings, one to two feet in diameter, may occur over decaying stumps. In some cases no change in colour of the grass is noted; only the circular ring of fruiting bodies shows that the grass has a fungous infection. In other cases the grass is killed or severely damaged and the ring is invaded by weeds. The mechanism responsible for the colour change in the grass is not known. In man, certain fungous infections of the skin may also produce circular or arcuate shapes² (Fig. 4) or fairy rings. None that I know of produce mushrooms.

According to the Oxford English Dictionary the first literary reference to fairy rings was by Ben Jonson in 1559:

*"And [let] turtle-footed Peace dance
fairy rings
About her court . . ."*³

Shakespeare has Prospero say, in speaking of elves:

*" . . . you demi-puppets that
By moonshine do the green sour
ringlets make,
Whereof the ewe not bites . . ."*⁴

The notion that these rings may consist of sour grass is also reported from Holland, where these circles were supposed to mark the places where the devil churned his butter.⁵ Their presence on a farm caused an inferior quality of butter if the cows ate the grass from the fairy ring. I once tasted the grass on the inside and

outside of a fairy ring in my garden and could detect no difference—but then, I am neither a cow nor a ewe.

Erasmus Darwin in 1791 offered the explanation that fairy rings were caused by "cylindrical" lightning which burned the grass in a circular pattern, after which the soil had greater fertility.

*"So from dark clouds the playful
lightning springs,
Rives the firm oak or prints the fairy
rings."*⁶



FIG. 1—Fairy rings in Southern Alberta (courtesy of Dr. J. B. Lebeau, Canada Agriculture Research Station, Lethbridge, Alberta).



FIG. 3—Fruiting bodies of *Marasmius oreades* Fr., forming an arcuate pattern, in my garden in Ottawa.



FIG. 2—Fairy ring composed of fruiting bodies forming a circle (courtesy of D. Gilroy, Regina, Sask.).

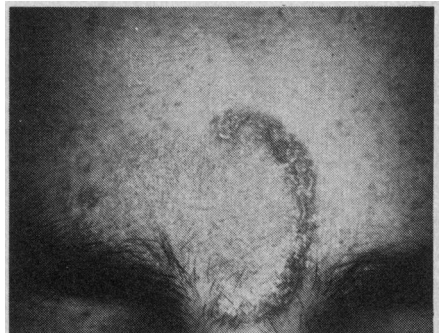


FIG. 4—Animal fungous infection (ringworm) on forehead. Note active border forming approximately two-thirds of a circle.

Many other superstitions have arisen in various parts of the world concerning fairy rings.⁵ In Sweden, a person entering a fairy ring passed entirely under the control of the fairies. Treasures were marked by such rings in many places, but these riches could not be secured without the help of fairies or witches. In German mythology, the circular spots where the grass had dried up were places where a glowing dragon had rested after his nightly wanderings. In France, many people could not be induced to enter one of these rings

because enormous toads with bulging eyes abounded there; but no harm was experienced if the rings were unintentionally entered at night. In England it was regarded as a good omen to build a house on land showing these circles.

One of the most imaginative descriptions of fairy rings is in "Peter Pan in Kensington Gardens" by J. M. Barrie:

"The fairies are exquisite dancers, and that is why one of the first things a baby does is to sign to you to dance to him and then to cry

when you do it. They hold their great balls in the open air, in what is called a fairy ring. For weeks afterwards you can see the ring on the grass. It is not there when they begin, but they make it by waltzing around and round. Sometimes you will find mushrooms inside the ring, and these are fairy chairs that the servants have forgotten to clear away. The chairs and the rings are the only tell-tale marks these little people leave behind them, and they would remove even these were they not so fond of dancing that they toe it till the very moment of the opening of the gates. David and I once found a fairy ring quite warm."⁷

Did you ever try to take the temperature of a mushroom?

To bring the subject up to date, mention should be made of an item in that publication of unimpeachable scientific integrity, "The Old Farmers' Almanac 1967", which states that "... in the summer of 1965 a . . . Fairy-ring was discovered at Jaffray, New Hampshire and reported fully in the local Monadnock-Ledger as having been left there by a Flying Saucer"⁸.

Robert Jackson

Ottawa, Ont.

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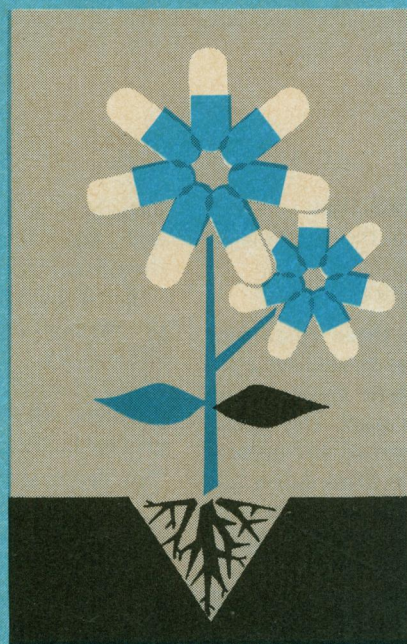
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Aequanimitas

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best fitted for the new role. I know, I know, there are still a great many unanswered questions and agreement has not even been reached on the designation to be applied to the new category of health worker. However, no fewer than 13 projects and studies are currently proceeding in Ontario alone. My prognosis is that the scope of the activities of the nurse will be enlarged and that she will emerge as a very Special Nurse indeed.

A.D.K.



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