



From the Mushroom Basket:

AURICULARIA AMERICANA

Jelly tree ear

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In Western scientific literature this mushroom was first described from Europe as *Auricularia auricula-judae*, because it has the shape of an ear and was found on an elder tree, the same tree from which Judas hung himself. The common name in English soon changed from **Judas' ear** to **Jew's ear**. Because of the xenophobic potential of these names, the organism has been renamed *Auricularia auricula*, the common name **Tree ear** or **Jelly tree ear**. Closer examination revealed that the mushroom in North America differed significantly from that in Europe, and the American species was named *Auricularia americana*.

Its European cousin grows primarily on elder and other deciduous trees, while *A. americana* is described as a rotter of coniferous wood. Similar mushrooms are also found on deciduous wood, but mating experiments showed that organisms from the two differing substrates would not mate, or would do so with great difficulty. This suggests the two are, or are evolving to become, different species. Unfortunately these results have not been explored further. Current DNA studies might quite likely confirm them as two different species. It is also possible that the mushrooms along the east and west coasts of North America have evolved into separate species, as they moved up and down the continent with their host substrates during periods of glaciation. Thus, there is plenty of genealogy to be mined here, including the genetic distinction of our species from the European ones and from those in the Far East, where a larger version, *Auricularia polytricha*, is cultivated for eating.

The jelly tree ear is edible. Like many jelly mushrooms, it does not have much taste, but provides



***Auricularia americana* on coniferous wood (above) and deciduous wood (below, found by Henry Mann during a thaw on Valentine's Day, 2010). The colour range, not related to the type of host wood, extends to even lighter and darker extremes than shown. It can be confused with a cup fungus or a member of the similar *Tremella* genus. The substrate separates it from tremellas, which are parasites of living trees, while *Auricularia* is a rotter of dead wood.**

an enjoyable consistency and is able to absorb and concentrate tastes of spices and other flavours in the food. This is the black mushroom most commonly found in Chinese foods. As many rotters of dead wood, it can be readily cultivated and because of its popularity in Asian cooking, is one of the commonest commercially grown mushrooms in the world.