Liz Boden previews a series of fascinating woodland fungi forays, but...shhh! They're a bit of a secret.

Nothing can beat wandering round woodlands in the autumn, crunching through fallen leaves and under branches, in pursuit of supper. And, from the beginning of October, there’s an opportunity to do just that, in the company of an expert.

The Secret Sunday Mushroom Club begins with the basis to forage safely for wild mushrooms. Led by Fred Gillam, of The Wild Side of Life, this enlightening, course, roaming ancient Wiltshire woodland, is an earthly introduction to the fun of fungi foraging.

Why is it called The Secret Sunday Mushroom Club? Because participants need to become members of the club and are then given the secret location for each foraging course, after Fred has researched the best areas for fungi.

“I regularly provide myself with delicious meals prepared from more than 100 species of wild fungi of various sorts,” says Fred. “There can be no guarantees when it comes to foraging wild mushrooms, but joining the club will certainly increase both your confidence and your chances of making some gourmet finds.”

It’s intuitive for humans to hunt for food but this instinct has been stifled by what is termed ‘progress’, and most of us contain our foraging to the supermarket shelves, with maybe a spot of blackberrying as the summer retreats.

Foraging is pretty simple. All you need is a collecting basket and penknife for gathering; a toothbrush and bottle of water for cleaning; and a camera, notepad and pen to help with future identification.

Fact file

The next forages are from 1.30pm-4.30pm on October 6, 10.30am-4pm on October 20 and October 27, and from 10.30am-4pm on November 3. You don’t need to attend every course, but you do need to become a member.

On October 26 Fred is leading a one-day gourmet mushroom discovery course.

To book a place, email bobdogstar@yahoo.co.uk putting ‘mushroom club’ at the subject. Visit www.thewildsideoflife.co.uk putting ‘mushroom club’ as the subject.

I came away from the course confident in picking and eating several species of mushroom. The key to mushrooming is not to get cocky. Many edible mushrooms have a toxic twin. And even lifelong foraging experts consult more than one book.

It is important to be aware that some people are sensitive to certain mushrooms, even those deemed not to be poisonous. If you are trying a mushroom for the first time, just try a little to ensure you don’t react badly. But the safest way to gather mushrooms is to have an expert like Fred with you.

At the end of the course we shared our finds equally.

After Fred had checked our bounty, and confirmed they were safe to pick, we would cut them free with our penknives. With an exciting discovery he would blow his whistle to alert the group and we would regroup to examine his find. At the end of the afternoon we would conglomerate and spread out our wares on a blanket, then share them out equally.

One of our most exciting harvests was the beef steak mushroom, a bracket fungus, which thrives in ancient woodland, growing on tree trunks, usually oak or sweet chestnut, with the look and texture of muscle and a blood-red sap. This took our eyes upwards, unlike many of the ground-dwelling fungi we were searching for.

And it was a magical moment when we spotted a fly agaric, the white-spotted red mushroom famed in fairy tales. Non-intoxically poisonous, though not deadly, the fly agaric is a powerful hallucinogen. We left it untouched.

The equipment required for mushroom foraging is pretty simple. All you need is a collecting basket and penknife for gathering; a toothbrush and bottle of water for cleaning; and a camera, notepad and pen to help with future identification.

“Lots of people are interested in mushrooms yet few have the knowledge to forage for them safely,” says Fred. “This course covers the basics of keeping safe and identifying several species to get you started in the world of foraging.”

Wood and Broterswood. Location is dictated by weather conditions and what will thrive where, so participants are notified a day or two in advance where that week’s hunt will take place.

At the appointed time, we would gather for our teddieswarming. Fred would point out on that day’s potential finds; what delights to anticipate and where we were likely to track them down.

We would then branch off; some in groups, some in pairs, others preferring to wander alone.

When hunting for mushrooms you spend most of the time with your eyes cast down, scouring the ground. It’s amazing what you spot once you know what you’re looking for.

One of our most exciting harvests was the beef steak mushroom, a bracket fungus, which thrives in ancient woodland, growing on tree trunks, usually oak or sweet chestnut, with the look and texture of muscle and a blood-red sap. This took our eyes upwards, unlike many of the ground-dwelling fungi we were searching for.

And it was a magical moment when we spotted a fly agaric, the white-spotted red mushroom famed in fairy tales. Non-intoxically poisonous, though not deadly, the fly agaric is a powerful hallucinogen. We left it untouched.

The equipment required for mushroom foraging is pretty simple. All you need is a collecting basket and penknife for gathering; a toothbrush and bottle of water for cleaning; and a camera, notepad and pen to help with future identification.

“Lots of people are interested in mushrooms yet few have the knowledge to forage for them safely,” says Fred. “This course covers the basics of keeping safe and identifying several species to get you started in the world of foraging.”

I came away from the course confident in picking and eating several species of mushroom. The key to mushrooming is not to get cocky. Many edible mushrooms have a toxic twin. And even lifelong foraging experts consult more than one book.

It is important to be aware that some people are sensitive to certain mushrooms, even those deemed not to be poisonous. If you are trying a mushroom for the first time, just try a little to ensure you don’t react badly. But the safest way to gather mushrooms is to have an expert like Fred with you.