



“ Unaware that this was even in the works, I determined to investigate how [a new State Mushroom] had been achieved. ”



For Texas mycophiles there was a jaw-dropping announcement on June 18, 2021. Texas Governor Abbott signed legislation enshrining a fungus, *Chorioactis geaster*—the Texas Star, aka the Devil’s Cigar—as the official State Mushroom of Texas, making Texas only the third state to recognize the fungal kingdom, joining Minnesota (*Morchella esculenta*) and Oregon (*Cantharellus formosus*). Unaware that this was even in the works, I determined to investigate how it had been achieved. The idea was to provide a broad road map for other states to follow, lessons learned, key elements for success, and a list of dos and don’ts.

Mushroom Statehood

The expectation was for a traditional organizational approach: local society spawns the idea, committees are formed, people work diligently but intermittently for ages, contacts are recruited, legislators are wooed, sponsors are found who will shepherd the proposal. It dies in one of the houses, and is either resubmitted until finally a bill gets passed or people give up the quest. A very different scenario was uncovered.

It was largely a one-person endeavor by an individual endowed with an important skill set—outstanding communication and planning abilities, commitment, passion and persistence. It was not a committee or consensus-driven project. A few members of the local mushroom society contributed some assistance and occasional cheerleading. For privacy reasons, the pseudonym “Cy” will be used for the person who guided this process.

Texas mushroom societies have had a fitful history, with the Gulf States Mycological Society still carrying the flag. The most recent effort to begin a group was in the Austin/San Antonio/San Marcos area in 2019. Early in their gestation as the Central Texas Mycological Society (CTMS) they chose the Texas Star mushroom as their logo. An informal “meetup” group (Texas Wild Mushrooming Group) has also been around for some years, teaching locals basic fungal biology, mushroom taxonomy and conducting forays in the Austin area. Cy, an avid naturalist, is a member of this group, leading some forays. While passionate about fungi, she has wide ranging interests about the natural

world, including botany, ornithology and entomology.

While driving through Oregon and Washington hunting for Matsutake, and having to fill out all the paperwork now required for mushroom foraging, Cy learned that Oregon had an official state mushroom, which led her to question whether Texas had one. She was already aware of the Texas Star (*Chorioactis geaster*), having first found it herself in 1996 (<https://mushroomobserver.org/260872?q=1heR4>), and thought this fungus was tailor-made for Texas statehood. When sporulating, it often splits into a five-sided star. It is confined to a narrow swath of Texas, from San Antonio up through the central portion of the state and has had the temerity to sneak into Oklahoma. A similar population has been described in Japan and this curious disjunct is still under investigation.

Cy mentioned the idea to some members of the CTMS, garnering interest, but no commitment or solid expertise in the legislative world. CTMS is still a young



organization with an immature structure and there was no committee system to take command, convincing her to tackle the project on her own as there is a short window of only several months and the next legislative session is two years away. Knowingly or not, she also followed one of the rules about committees: *If a committee consists of three people, the only time it accomplishes anything is if one member is ill and the other is on vacation.* She educated herself about the machinations of the Texas legislature. A digital “binder” of information about this mushroom was developed and a Facebook page to keep interested people abreast of the developments was begun (<https://www.facebook.com/TexasStateMushroom>). Individuals were able to post photographs and information, such as articles about this mushroom by Dr. Harold Keller,

a resident research associate at the Botanical Research Institute of Texas (BRIT), providing helpful historical, scientific and background data. Another BRIT research associate, Robert O’Kennon was responsible for many of the sightings in Tarrant County, Texas, posting them on iNaturalist.

She learned that the best way to get this resolution considered was to submit it concurrently to both the House and Senate. Next was the issue of finding legislators to sponsor a bill. Her first inclination was to go the Democratic side, believing that they might have a more eco-friendly mindset. Not so. She was turned down. In a tactical switch, she was fortunate to have contacts who approached a couple of conservative Republicans who signed on—Senator Donna Campbell and Representative Ben Leman. Being the majority party

there may not have been much support for a Democratic-sponsored bill anyway.

Senator Donna Campbell was the first to sign up on being approached by a constituent of her district, Forrest Mims III, who was among the first Cy contacted because he had written several articles about this mushroom and been instrumental in shepherding Japanese scientists in their visit, and comparing the Texas species to the Japanese one. But it was in a meeting, set up by a constituent who found this mushroom in Representative Ben Leman’s district, where Cy first presented the key talking points about this mushroom and captured Leman’s imagination and interest. The bill (see below) was crafted in such compelling language that any blue-blooded Texan would feel proud that their state was home to such a unique organism. Senator Campbell’s office

followed Representative Leman's lead, including using his riveting language.

Once the bills had sponsors came the interminable, slow grinding of the legislative wheels. For more details about the Texas timeline view the process at:

<https://openstates.org/tx/bills/87/HCR61/>. At many of the stages, online support for the bill was solicited as well as in-person testimony. The CTMS launched a letter-writing campaign to the Culture, Recreation and Tourism House Committee, which was the first step in the approval process. This produced 13 pages of support, most from CTMS members. 2021 was a very busy year for the Texas legislature: 9,999 bills introduced, 1,034 signed, and 20 vetoed. The State Mushroom bill passed in the closing days of the session and was almost the last to reach the governor's desk for signature.

There is clearly not a universal road map. No cookie-cutter approach. Each state legislature has different dynamics, each mushroom society has different resources, strengths and weaknesses. However, there are lessons that might be valuable as other states undertake a similar venture.

Dos

1. Select a charismatic mushroom, unique if possible, around which a compelling story can be constructed.
2. Focus on state pride.
3. Clearly understand the legislative process.
4. Find someone with excellent communication and planning skills with the passion to see the project through.
5. Society members should provide cheerleading and assistance if requested, especially letters of support, but not critique. (Don't hire a master painter to paint you a masterpiece and then assign a roomful of schoolboy artists to look over his shoulder to suggest improvements.)
6. Recruit knowledgeable, connected constituents to approach legislators from their district.
7. Keep presentations brief, engaging and razor sharp. Legislators are extremely busy.

Don'ts

1. Don't be constrained by politics. The goal is a state mushroom. Think outside the box.
2. Never dismiss the "Power of One." (If you want to win the high jump find someone who can jump 8 feet, not 8 people each of whom can jump 1 foot.)
3. In this era of anti-science, don't overwhelm the story with science or academic support.
4. The profound message is how a single individual succeeded in tackling a daunting task, navigated a complex bureaucracy, and utilized the power of story-telling to engage legislators who, at the outset, probably knew little or nothing about fungi.

*Submitted by a Contributing Editor (on temporary investigative assignment).
Reviewed and signed off by Cy. Photos courtesy of Jared McRae.*

H.C.R. No. 61

HOUSE CONCURRENT RESOLUTION

WHEREAS, Among the fascinating array of flora in the Lone Star State, one of the most unique species, both in appearance and life cycle, is the Texas star mushroom; and

WHEREAS, This extremely rare mushroom, known scientifically as *Chorioactis geaster*, was first collected in Austin in 1893 and is nearly exclusive

to Texas, with Japan being the only other place in the world with a notable population; highly selective about where it chooses to grow, the mushroom's Texas range is limited to the central and northern parts of the state and includes Fayette, Guadalupe, Hays, Travis, Collin, Dallas, Denton, Tarrant, and Hunt Counties; and

WHEREAS, The Texas star appears in winter, most commonly on the exposed roots and decaying stumps of cedar elm trees; it emerges as a dark brown capsule about four inches in length, which inspired its nickname, the devil's cigar; and

WHEREAS, After rains, the mushroom explodes open with an audible hiss, seemingly puffing smoke as it fills the air with a cloud of spores that waft away to help ensure a future generation for the species; in addition to its other memorable traits, the mushroom, once opened, has a starlike shape that makes it seem custom designed for the Lone Star landscape; and

WHEREAS, A poignant reminder of the natural diversity that surrounds us, the Texas star mushroom is as uncommon and striking as the state that serves as its home, and it is indeed deserving of special recognition; now, therefore, be it

RESOLVED, That the 87th Legislature of the State of Texas hereby designate the Texas star mushroom as the official State Mushroom of Texas.

Leman 🍄

