

Mushroom Photography: Choosing the right Tripod

By John Plischke III

A tripod is often a necessary tool for mushroom photography. This is because mushrooms are often located in dark shaded areas of the woods and other similar places where there is a lack of sunlight. The lack of light causes longer exposure times which can often cause camera shake and result in blurred photos. When photographing very tiny mushrooms using high magnification, small amounts of camera shake become even more pronounced.

Even when there is plenty of full sun shining on the mushrooms, I prefer to either move then to a shady area or to use my body to block the harsh sun rays. By doing this my shadow is cast over the mushroom so that I get a more pleasing and even looking lighting. Unless using flash in these situations, a tripod is a must.

Which Tripod Is Best

If you are using a small pocket sized digital camera then there are several brands of pocket sized tripods that can be useful. Many of them can be purchased for less than ten dollars.

If you are using a full sized 35mm film camera or a full sized digital camera it becomes much more complicated. Not every type of tripod will work for mushrooms, in fact only a small percentage of tripods will work exceptionally well for them.

The first feature a tripod must have is the ability for the legs to stretch all the way out allowing the camera to get down low right next to the ground where the mushrooms are located. Many tripods have leg braces and/or a center column that prevent this, so you must do some searching to find an appropriate tripod.

Some tripods have a removable center post that can be replaced with a short stubby one thus allowing the tripod to get low. Other types of tripods lack a center post or column and they do not need modified to be able to get low. Other tripods let the center column be removed and reinstalled upside down so that the camera is basically underneath the tripod. I do not recommend this method, the tripod legs will be in the way and you need to climb under them to do the photography. In any event, the legs must be able to go all the way out and lay flat on the ground.

The second feature to look for is the size and weight of the tripod. A tripod should be light enough for you to carry through the woods while in search of fungi but still large and stable enough to provide adequate support. Several people, like a middle age camera store salesman and his elderly father tried to talk me into buying a super heavy tripod, I could barely lift it, but the old man told

me he carries it all through the woods while photographing birds. It does not have to be built like a tank but should be stable. Tripods that are carbon fiber are typically much lighter but cost about twice as much. I also like to look for a tripod that folds up small enough so that it will fit in my suitcase when I am traveling. The tripod I currently use has 3 section telescoping legs that can be easily collapsed.

The third feature that I like to look for is an arm that can be either part of the top of the tripod or is added there to help get into the tight awkward spots that mushrooms grow in.

The fourth feature to look for is the ability for each leg to be adjusted independently. This is a real must. Often with uneven ground in the woods I may have a tripod leg or two sticking out further than the rest to keep everything stable and fairly level. Each of the tripods legs should also have the ability to be locked into any position where you may need it.

Once a tripod is chosen there are a few easy modifications that can be done to prevent future problems. If your tripod comes with an Allen wrench make sure to use electrical tape to tape the Allen wrench to one of the tripod's legs. Never use the plastic mounting clip that comes with the Allen wrench because it comes off easily and will become lost. Not losing the Allen wrench will save a mushroom trip if your tripod becomes loose, it's only a matter of when and if you have it.

Florescent electrical tape can be useful to mark you tripod and camera bag with, it's not pretty but when picking and photographing mushrooms off the trail in the middle of the woods your equipment is bound to get misplaced. When having fun picking and photographing mushrooms, photographic equipment is bound to get accidentally left behind. It may take over a half an hour of mushroom hunting until you realize your expensive tripod has become lost and then panic sets in. The tape can make it a lot easier to find.

The Uni-Loc System 1700 Tripod



The Uni-loc is very similar to the Benbo tripod but is somewhat an improved version of the Benbo 7 Trekker. The tripod head can be installed on either end of its center column. Some tripod manufactures such as Gitzo and Manfrotto make accessory side arms or magic arms that can be added to the tops of their tripods.

The features that I like most about the Uni-loc: 1. the arm on top of the tripod. On most tripods there is a center column that can be moved up and down but not across. The Uni-loc has a 180 degree arm that can be used up or down or across. Using it in the across way is very helpful in many difficult situations, such as when a polypore is growing on the upper part on the middle of a fallen trunk. With a "regular" tripod the legs will often hit the trunk and your camera can not get close enough to the mushroom to fill the frame. With the arm extended the camera can be put right next to the mushroom. The arm also has a very useful adjustment that allows it to angle like when your arm bends at the elbow and a double sided head platform and one side the 2 head mounts are 90 degrees apart. 2. The quick setup, there is a single sort of locking clamp that lets you adjust the tripod and put it into the right position, on most occasions in a matter of a couple seconds. If the legs have to be extended there are only 2 leg sections on each leg which makes expanding the legs very quick. 3. The tripod leg flexibility. On some tripods the legs can not be adjusted separately and they only be locked into 3 or 4 height positions. With the Uni-loc if a mushroom was growing on my shoulder or high up in a tree 2 legs can be put on the ground and the third one on my shoulder or up against the tree. All 3 legs can be adjusted into any position and can go clear down to ground level. Some tripods differ by having a stop that limits the legs from going all the way down to the ground and/or have certain angles that you have to lock the leg into position at. The Uni-loc costs about \$259.00.

These features can be a problem. 1. The center lock can become loose after time and a lot of use. 2. The tripod takes a while to get use to. The legs can be put into so many positions it can be like wrestling it for the first week or so but once the adjustments are mastered they are something that will be indispensable. 3. Tripod repair and purchase can be a real problem. Not many stores stock them and I have yet to find a place for parts. I have already worn out 2 Uni-lock tripods and moved on to the Gitzo.

The Gitzo Explorer G2220



On one end of the center column there is a hook to attach your camera bag to give extra stability. The tripod can go down to 4 ½ inches tall when expanded all the way to the ground and when extended all the way up it is 64 inches tall. It weighs 5.1 pounds. It will support 13.2 pounds and is 25.2 inches long when folded up.

The Gitzo G2220 - Mine has 3 leg adjustments (sections on each leg), don't waste your money and get the one with 4, it takes much longer to set up and I do not see any advantages for mushroom photography. I have the aluminum version. There is a carbon fiber version that weighs a little less, 4.4 pounds, but is twice the money. If I had a lot of money to blow I probably would get the carbon fiber version but the weight difference is just a few ounces.

The Gitzo has the arm like the Uni-loc and is very similar. There is one main difference. Instead of having a single center lock to adjust the tripod legs like the Uni-loc, its legs each have their own lock and have to be adjusted one at a time. It takes a little longer to set up, but it is more like a traditional tripod leg adjustment. The legs can be put up to a 90 degree angle so I could not put one on my shoulder but could put it on my hip. There is not a problem with the center lock going bad since it does not have one. It's big plus is that it folds up shorter than the Uni-loc and does not get stuck on branches as much as my Uni-loc when walking through the woods. This is because its legs each have 3 sections instead of 2 like Uni-loc. Problems: the legs are slightly less adjustable and they make a click when you lock them. The click is not a problem with mushroom photography because the noise will not scare the mushrooms away. It could be a small issue with animals. All in all both tripods are very similar and either would be a good choice. I like the Gitzo in most ways a little better with the exception of 90 degree leg movement and the slower setup speed. Both tripods will go flat to the ground.