

Beatrix Potter

(1866-1943)

Beloved Children's Author...and Mycologist

Peter Rabbit, Jemima Puddleduck, Benjamin Bunny, and Mr McGregor are just a few of the creations of beloved children's author Beatrix Potter. But Potter's contributions to the study of fungi, known as mycology, are far less well known, and still subject to controversy.

Potter's interest in the natural world developed as a child when she began drawing and painting flora and fauna. In 1892, Potter showed her work to local naturalist (and postman) Charles McIntosh. He was impressed, and advised her on scientific classification and microscope techniques. He also sent her specimens to paint. She loved mushrooms in particular, using a microscope to examine fungal spores.

In 1896 Potter met George Masee, the mycologist at the Royal Botanic Gardens at Kew and within a few months, she was germinating spores of fungi and measuring their growth. Her ideas about spore germination and fungal reproduction were breaking new ground but Masee and the Director of Kew, William Thistleton-Dyer, were openly sceptical. Eventually, Potter's paper "*On the Germination of the Spores of Agaricineae*", was presented to the prestigious Linnean Society of London. The Society did not admit women until 1905 so Potter was absent when the work was discussed. Sadly, no copies of the paper remain today.

Potter also studied the true nature of lichens. Lichens are now known to be symbiotic organisms composed of a fungus and a photosynthetic partner, either an alga or a cyanobacterium. In Potter's time, however, the concept that lichens were a dual organism was controversial. Historians and scientists have debated her contribution to the discovery of lichen duality, interpreting her letters and journal (written in code and only published more than two decades after her death) differently. Notwithstanding this debate, the hundreds of scientifically accurate paintings Potter produced make her contribution to the field of mycology now indisputable.



Main image: Beatrix Potter [Getty Images].
Background: Mycological illustration of the reproductive system of a fungus. [Beatrix Potter, Public Domain - Armitt Museum].

