

Truffles: one of the most expensive foodstuffs in the world, and not necessarily one that most would associate with being found in English ground. However, truffles in southern England are thriving, the warm climate nourishing their growth. Due to the rich, calciferous soil found in counties such as Hampshire, Wiltshire and Dorset, the most truffles are to be found here, due to the truffles' need for soils high in alkaline content.

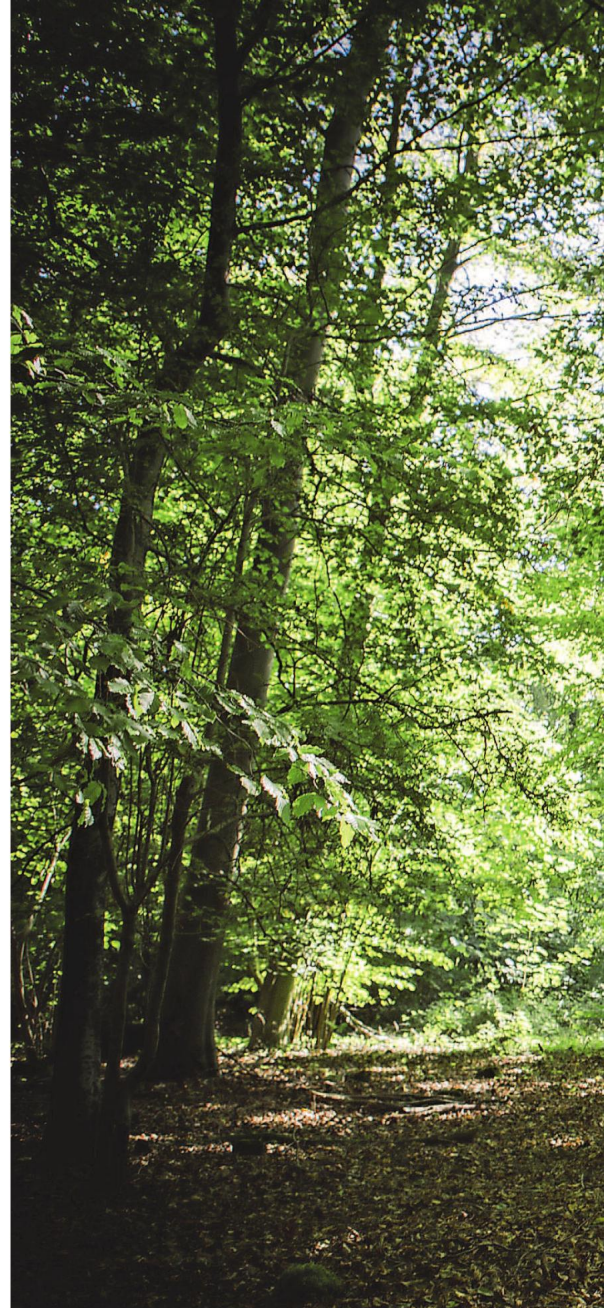
Deep in the Hampshire countryside, James Feaver, along with his trusty young Labrador Jack, is a full-time truffle hunter, running training courses for those eager to find the 'black gold' and also to sample it – James's English Truffle Company runs a successful online outlet for everything related to truffles, made freshly to order and patronised by restaurants, top chefs and just those plain mad on the stuff.

Today the rolling fields of Hampshire are bathed in sunlight, and my car is bowling along, kicking up gusty drifts of bronze-coloured leaves as I go. I am sworn to secrecy as to the whereabouts of today's truffle hunting location. This is to remain responsibly eco-friendly,

protecting the fungi – gangs of foragers operate on a commercial scale, sweeping fragile woodland. Environmentalists and mycologists are concerned that fungi are being taken recklessly, with little thought for preserving the habitat for next year.

Once James and Jack and our group are safely within the plantation, the silence of the golden wood envelops us. We are utterly surrounded by the sound of the trees, the sunlight occasionally breaking through to trace glintingly upon patches of earth. The sense of possibility is electric. Jack in all his canine enthusiasm is almost unbearably excited, his fervour for the hunt sending ripples through every person. Crunching rapidly through the leaves, we set off on an indeterminate route, Jack taking point, closely followed by James and his dog whistle.

A beech wood is an ideal location for a truffle hunt, as beeches are host trees. James focuses on searching for *Tuber Aestivum*, the black summer truffle that is one of the best edible truffles growing in Britain. Like many fungi, they have a mycorrhizal (symbiotic) relationship with the trees – the fungi's web-like mycelium attach to the tree root system and then ▶



**ABOVE:** Hampshire's soil is ideal for truffles

**LEFT:** The knobbled black fungi are often referred to as 'black gold'



# WHAT LIES BENEATH

A rare and expensive commodity is lying, unexposed, beneath our woodland floors. VERITY HESKETH goes on the hunt for truffles

# TRUFFLES

produce fruit (the truffle itself) in the autumn and winter. In return, the fungi supplies the tree with nutrients and water.

“Summer truffles are prized for their culinary value and are close cousins to the famous Périgord black truffle, though not as strongly flavoured,” explains James over his shoulder, whilst the group push on through the bracken.

Jack suddenly stops on his bounding gallop. Nose pushed deeply into the leaves covering the ground, he digs. It is almost as if he knows not to disturb the earth too vigorously, as he soon stops, a paw raised. James quickly feeds him a piece of cheese as a treat for his diligence, and we all crane forward to get a better look at the cleared ground. Out of one of his handy bags, James produces a delicate-looking shovel, a small wire brush, and a kneeling mat. No sooner has one of the group begun to clear the earth, a shout goes up: a smallish, black, knobby shape is clearly visible. By gently clearing around it, less than a minute in, we have our opening prize.

The truffle is about the size of a kiwi fruit, covered in dark, tiny diamond-shaped protuberances. It's passed around the group with as much care and reverence as a precious jewel. When the truffle is carefully placed into my palm, the aroma that it emits reminds me strongly of fresh, raw beetroot, with an underlying note of nutty sweetness. It is an unmistakably earthy, pungent aroma.

As we zealously press on, it's clear to see that Jack has no time for any attention today, avoiding stroking or being spoken to by any member of the group but James, obeying a short set of commands; 'go find', 'come back' and 'what is it?'.

“He's in work-mode”, explains James, “Scent work is especially tiring for dogs, and it will take huge amounts of his energy to focus on the task in hand. However, he values his rewards greatly!”

Many kinds of dogs can be trained for truffle



**ABOVE:** Jack the labrador sniffs out the truffles under the woodland floor

hunting, and James also runs specific training days for eager dogs and owners. Although pigs are generally thought of as traditional working companions for the truffle hunter, dogs are much more easily trained to recognise a working reward system, rather than quickly gobbling up their expensive finds. In days of yore, specifically female pigs were used to hunt truffles because, as scientists have recently discovered, there are chemical similarities between the aroma that a truffle gives off and the sex pheromone emitted by a male pig's saliva.

As Jack successfully points out more fruitful places through the expedition with his keenly twitching nose, the keenness of the party to find the treasure becomes much more marked. As black truffles are very

difficult to spot, being partially buried and also easily mistaken for beech masts, it is not only the dog that can sniff out a prize. One by one, the members of the group get their noses close to the ground, sniffing blindly for the well-camouflaged cache. “A good day's truffle hunting is marked by a muddy face!” laughs James.

As the last precious truffle is carefully placed into the swag bag, we troop back to the gate. With every step, I now feel a sense of opportunity, imagining the bumpy skinned truffles all around us, hiding under our boots, invisible and willing to be found. Even though there is a high monetary value for this rare commodity, people all over the world paying insanely inflated prices for mere single truffles, this is not about money. It's about preservation. In today's world that is full of rush, crush and frenetic busyness, it's more important than ever to recognise the touch of time, reaching out across the seasons, shaking the leaves from the trees, and bringing the scent of the forage on the autumn breeze. 🐾

**To book a workshop with James, purchase truffle-related products, or to find out more, visit [englishtruffles.co.uk](http://englishtruffles.co.uk)**

