

The Boston Globe

Inside the movement to legalize magic mushrooms in Massachusetts

Organizers have collected more than 75,000 signatures on a ballot initiative to legalize psychedelic mushrooms.

By [Chris Serres](#) Globe Staff, Updated October 26, 2023, 6:18 a.m.

The movement to legalize shrooms in Massachusetts

On a crisp autumn morning, a pair of hikers bounded through a tangle of oak trees before dropping their backpacks near the banks of a large, shimmering pond at Blue Hills Reservation in Milton.

The hikers, James Davis and Mollie McGurk, then dipped their fingers into a sandwich bag full of shriveled brown mushrooms — each no bigger than a pen cap — and popped them into their mouths. Grown at home, the mushrooms contained a psychedelic compound, known as psilocybin, that can significantly alter a person’s thoughts and perceptions. Because of their mind-altering power, they have been illegal under federal law for the past half century.

About 40 minutes after swallowing the plants, the effects began to set in. Davis and McGurk, self-described “mushroom nerds,” talked of becoming more lucid and focused as they scoured the woods for wild fungi, occasionally plunging their hands under logs and rocks. Eventually, the psychedelics wore off and the couple returned to their separate homes — relaxed and clear-headed.

“Laws prohibiting [psychedelic] mushrooms are choking off our truest human potential,” said McGurk, a writer from Connecticut.



James Davis and Mollie McGurk displayed psychedelic mushrooms before foraging at Blue Hills Reservation in Milton on Oct. 14, 2023. CRAIG F. WALKER/GLOBE STAFF

McGurk and Davis are among a growing number of recreational users of psilocybin mushrooms in New England attempting to turn their passion for the fungi into a broader movement, while campaigning for local measures that would legalize the use and cultivation of the plants.

Emboldened by laws legalizing cannabis, and a cascade of [new research](#) exploring the benefits of mind-altering compounds to [treat depression](#) and other mental health disorders, they are trying to combat the stigma surrounding psychedelics by using them proudly and publicly. They are growing their own mushrooms, brewing them as tea, and foraging for them in woods from the Berkshires to Greater Boston. The surge in interest has spawned a cottage industry of self-trained guides, known as “trip sitters,” who provide support to people on psychedelic experiences that can last up to six hours.

They are also beginning to flex their political muscle. Since early September, canvassers have fanned out across the state, collecting more than 75,000 signatures on a [proposed ballot petition](#) that would change state law to legalize the possession and supervised use of natural psychedelics, including psilocybin mushrooms. The initiative could go before voters next year. At the same time, [several bills](#) are under consideration in the Legislature that would allow adults to use and to grow small amounts of psilocybin mushrooms and other psychedelic plants, and ensure they are not criminally punished under state or local law.

Yet within this community there is division over legalization.

There are scores of people who have been growing and sharing magic mushrooms through underground networks for years support legalization because they want the therapeutic benefits to be more widely shared. Many researchers also see formal legalization as a vital way to demystify a plant that is considered [non-addictive](#) and has been used in Indigenous ceremonies for thousands of years. Yet there are other psilocybin users who are opposed to legalization because they fear any measure will result in a system of rules limiting access and driving up costs.

“There is a big debate over whether we would be better or worse off with legalization,” said Colomba Klenner, 24, a painter from Boston who uses psilocybin mushrooms to meditate and guides others on psychedelic experiences. “It’s hard to see how making a natural substance more regulated does anything to help de-stigmatize it.”

Modeled after similar measures in Oregon and Colorado, the proposed measure calls for the creation of a state commission to license “psychedelic therapy centers” staffed by trained “facilitators.” People would ingest them on site and go through the psychedelic experience under the supervision of these facilitators. Sale of magic mushrooms would be prohibited, but people 21 and over would be allowed to use and possess limited amounts.

Proponents say the ballot measure is gaining momentum in part because it appeals to a broad array of users. Because it would decriminalize psilocybin, people could still use, grow and share small amounts of magic mushrooms at home without fear of being prosecuted. Yet people who feel more comfortable ingesting the plants in the presence of a professional would have that option, they said.

“We have a mental health crisis, an addiction crisis and a loneliness and suicide crisis, and these substances can help with all those,” said Sarko Gergerian, a police lieutenant and psychotherapist from the Boston area who was among the initial signatories to the petition. “To not allow access at this point is an injustice.”

Yet the grassroots group [Bay Staters for Natural Medicine](#), which is pushing for the decriminalization of psychedelics, is opposed to the ballot initiative. Leaders have pointed to Oregon, where a state board

crafted a bevy of regulations after voters approved a ballot measure in 2020 legalizing psilocybin for medical use. Now Oregon requires licenses and fees for psilocybin producers, testing labs, service centers, and workers in the industry, all of which have made the substance more expensive and less accessible. The charge for a six-hour, psychedelic experience in Oregon can cost more than \$3,000 — prohibitively expensive for many trip-seekers, according to local news reports.

“It’s not a very practical way of making a promising therapy available,” Mason Marks, a senior fellow and lead of the [Project on Psychedelics Law and Regulation](#) at the Petrie-Flom Center at Harvard Law School, said of Oregon’s licensing rules.

Psychedelics have surged in popularity in recent years. The number of Americans using hallucinogens such as psilocybin mushrooms, mescaline and LSD has grown nearly sixfold over the past eight years to more than 7.4 million Americans in 2021, according to [the National Survey on Drug Use and Health](#). And since early 2021 six cities in Massachusetts, including Somerville, Cambridge and Northampton, have passed measures directing their police departments to end arrests for growing and sharing psilocybin mushrooms among adults.

The enthusiasm is driven in part by a growing body of research showing that psilocybin has significant promise to heal [anxiety, severe depression](#) and post-traumatic stress disorder. The campaign is also being propelled by the nation’s out-of-control opioid epidemic and a search for ways to reduce fatal overdoses.

Dr. Franklin King IV, a psychiatrist and director of training and education at [the Center for the Neuroscience of Psychedelics](#) at Massachusetts General Hospital, said psilocybin poses “definite psychological risks,” which can be mitigated if they are used with professional guidance. The compounds have the potential to induce psychosis and mania among people with serious psychiatric conditions; and people who take them for the first time in the wrong setting can have traumatic experiences, he said.

“These are powerful substances not meant to be taken lightly,” said King, who supports the state ballot measure. “Psychedelics can destabilize previously stabilized psychiatric patients.”

For now, users of magic mushrooms are still operating in a liminal legal space. In 1970, amid fears of a youth rebellion fueled by psychedelics, the Nixon administration placed psilocybin on the federal government’s list of [Schedule One drugs](#), on par with heroin, making it illegal to buy, possess, or distribute. Even in cities such as Cambridge and Somerville, which passed resolutions decriminalizing the plants, some users said they are afraid to talk publicly about their psychedelic use for fear of prosecution.

But not Davis and McGurk. On their winding hike, the two stopped beneath a canopy of oak trees to reflect on their lives and the effects of the mushrooms. To them, the fall colors seemed more vivid, the sounds closer and more melodic. They described past psychedelic experiences in which they felt as if their beings had dissolved, an experience that trippers often refer to as “ego death.” McGurk likened the trip to “a warm embrace from the universe,” which helped her make sense of recent traumatic events in her family.

At higher doses, psychedelic mushrooms “can erase every thought you had about your life and bring you into that overwhelming knowingness of something far greater than yourself,” she said. “For some, that can be terrifying.”

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