

Spanish Moss is an Oddity of the Plant World



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PHOTO CREDIT: William M. Johnson

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Spanish moss (*Tillandsia usneoides*) is a flowering, epiphytic plant belonging to the bromeliad family.

This makes it related to the plant that produces pineapples, which also is a bromeliad.

Widely distributed from southern Virginia to eastern Texas along the coastal strip of the southeastern United States, Spanish moss occurs across coastal areas of Texas. But, oddly enough, it can be either

very common or very rare depending on the location.

I frequently receive questions from people who are concerned that Spanish moss is damaging their trees. Contrary to what many people believe, Spanish moss is not a parasite and does not injure a tree by ob-



taining any nourishment from it.

As an epiphyte, Spanish moss lives on the tree but is independent of it. It uses the tree only for support and does not invade the living tissue like mistletoe and other parasitic plants.

Spanish moss gets everything it needs from light, rainwater and air. Like other green plants, Spanish moss uses light in a process called photosynthesis to create its food from carbon dioxide and water. Dust in the air also supplies some needed mineral nutrients.

The dominant color of Spanish moss is provided by an abundance of gray scales that cover the leaves. Spanish moss has the ability to absorb quantities of moisture into its leaves when it rains. The gray scales trap water underneath them when it rains, and the moisture is then gradually absorbed by the plant.

Live oaks and bald cypress seem especially well-suited for harboring this plant, and many of our older live oaks and bald cypress have at least some Spanish moss in them. But Spanish moss may be seen growing in many other tree species, as well as on dead trees, fences and even electrical power lines.

Because people sometimes see Spanish moss growing on a dead branch or tree, they mistakenly think the moss killed the branch or the tree, which is incorrect. The branch or tree died for other reasons, and the moss is simply growing there.

Although Spanish moss does not obtain any nourishment from a tree, under certain circumstances it can become a nuisance. If a weak limb becomes heavily laden with moss, it could break off. In shade trees, the only real reason for removing the moss is if you don't like the way it looks – not because of any damage it might do.

If removal of moss is necessary, mechanical removal is the preferred method. There are no herbicides labeled for controlling Spanish moss in trees. A long pole with a hook or a long-handled rake is useful to remove moss from lower branches. Many tree companies will perform mechanical removal with a bucket truck to reach high branches.

On the other hand, some people want moss to grow in trees that don't have any moss in them. You may gather living moss and simply hang it from branches in the tree where you want it to grow. If the growing conditions are to its liking, the moss will become established and grow in the tree. If not, it will die. There is nothing you can do if that happens—except perhaps try again.

In nature, most new Spanish moss plants sprout from a seed. The tiny, greenish flowers of Spanish moss produce a seed pod that turns brown and splits open when mature. The seeds inside are equipped with feathery parachutes that allow them to float through

the air like dandelion seeds until they lodge on a tree trunk or other suitable sites to grow. Strands and tiny pieces of moss carried by wind or birds to suitable locations also can grow into new plants.

In former times, moss had a variety of uses in upholstery. It was used to stuff everything from car cushions to horse collars, but it was mainly used in furniture manufacturing. Fresh moss was gathered and cured by wetting it down and packing it in trenches or pits. It usually remained in the pits for six months to eight months, in which time the outer covering rotted off, leaving the inner strand.

At the moss factory it was then sorted and cleaned and baled for shipment. Quite a few southern gardeners made at least a part-time living from collecting Spanish moss. The last operating factory in the South was located in Gainesville, FL. That factory burned down in 1958 and did not reopen.

Although Spanish moss is reported to be sensitive to air pollution; you would think it would not grow in urban areas with lots of cars but you can occasionally see it growing in landscapes across the Galveston/Houston region.

Spanish moss adds character to many live oaks in local parks. Whether you appreciate its appearance or wish it would go away, remember Spanish moss is harmless to the trees.