

What is Spanish Moss? The Plant, the Myth, the Facts:

Spanish Moss is actually an epiphyte, the most common member of the air plant family, which includes orchids, ferns and bromeliads. Air plants live on other plants and absorb nutrients and water from the air and rainfall. There are two common air plants (Ball Moss and Spanish Moss) and although it is unsightly to some, it is a characteristic of Southern landscapes. They provide food, water and shelter to Florida's wildlife.

The plant seems to show a preference of growth on southern live oak and bald cypress because of these trees' high rates of foliar mineral leaching (Ca, Mg, K, and P) providing an abundant supply of nutrients to the plant, but it can colonize in other tree species such as sweetgum, crape-myrtle, other oaks, or even pine. It will not colonize, for unknown reasons, on Southern Magnolias or Holly trees.

Spanish Moss is not a parasite and does not starve or jeopardize your trees, it has found a way to make its own food by processing minerals that dissolve in water that run off leaves and branches of the tree which they are anchored in. It rarely kills trees, but what it *does* do reduce the growth as it limits the light the tree receives and which is essential to the tree's leaves. It also can cause wind resistance and with Florida's hurricanes, makes quick work of heavily loaded trees. These plants also live on constructed surfaces, such as fences and telephone wires.



Spanish Moss



Ball Moss

Spanish Moss is a flowering plant and in spring produces a lone yellow-green flower on the terminal end of a moss strand. This plant uses seeds and vegetative growth to reproduce. Birds disperse it by using it for nesting material, (particularly the Parula Warbler and Baltimore Oriole) and intense storms scatter fragments that stick to tree limbs.



Parula Warbler and Nest with Spanish Moss

Spanish Moss is an excellent indicator of the health of trees in your landscape. Green plants are indicative of a healthy environment of your trees. Colonies of gray plants on a single tree suggest moisture or other environmental stress depending on location, age and latent construction damage which are environmental stressors that may be as impactful as moss.

Ball Moss is biologically similar to Spanish Moss except for its growth structure, which is sphere-like and compact in structure. It has a mass of stiff leaves which originate from the core, and appears spongy. Ball Moss blooms in spring with showy bluish-violet flowers. The round mass hides a seed capsule that releases for wind dispersal. More importantly, it is a similarly benign plant that does not harm trees, but in cases of intense propagation, may be an indicator of independent weaknesses or health problems in the host tree.

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