

Spanish Moss, a strange sight for visitors

To native Floridians, Spanish moss is just a part of the Florida landscape. But to newcomers and visitors, the plant is a fascinating part of the scenery. Trees draped with masses of gray-green Spanish moss are such magnificently beautiful exclamations in the winter landscape. There are many misconceptions because the moss looks and grows so much differently than other plants.

Spanish moss is not really a moss and it is not even Spanish. It has no roots and is not a parasite of the host tree. Spanish moss is an epiphytic plant which means it grows on another plant for support, but makes its own food. It gets water and nutrients from the air by absorption through its leaves and stems. Some tropical orchids and ferns are also epiphytic plants.

This native flowering plant grows in Southeastern U.S., Central America, and south as far as Argentina. It is said to have been named by early French explorers who called it 'Spanish Beard' as an insult to their Spanish rivals in the New World. Notice how the grayish 'beards' are draped in trees with a more horizontal branching instead of upward branching.

New plants are started from seeds or pieces of another plant. Spanish moss blooms from April to July with tiny, fragrant bluish flowers. They develop tiny seeds with hair-like sails that float on the wind until they become lodged on rough tree bark. During damaging wind storms, plant pieces can be broken off, blown to new locations and grow into new plants. Rough textured bark, warmth, and high humidity are needed to begin new growths of Spanish moss.

Native Americans had many uses for the abundant masses of plants. The same process they used to prepare Spanish moss long ago is still used today. Bundles of moss are submerged in shallow ponds for six weeks to rot away the outer layers. The remaining dark wiry filaments are tough and long lasting.

The filaments were once woven into a coarse cloth that was used as mats, bedding and horse blankets. Long fibers were twisted together to make rope. Dried moss made a good fire kindling for campfires as well as tips for the ends of fire arrows. Later it became popular as the stuffing material for furniture, auto seats, and mattresses. It is often now used as stuffing, packing material, and craft decorations.

Even though Spanish moss is not a parasite, it can harm a plant if it becomes exceptionally thick. Branches can break during long rains because the moss becomes so heavy with water. Also, if the tree leaves become blocked from sunlight, they cannot produce food for the tree.

Many small creatures make their home in the heavy clumps of Spanish moss. Chiggers, or red bugs are often living in moss that is close to the ground. Reptiles, amphibians, and spiders find the thick masses a good place to hide. Several species of bats hang out in the clumps. But, on a

lighter note, several lovely song birds, like the yellow-throated warbler, use the moss as nesting material or build their nests right in the long tresses.

If you would like to learn more about Spanish moss and other epiphytic plants, please visit the website <http://solutionsforyourlife.com>.

The UF Master Gardeners can be reached on Tuesday and Thursday mornings at 752-5384 to help you solve your gardening problems.

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