



Ball Moss



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Ball moss commonly grows on trees and utility wires. It is not a true moss; it's related to pineapple and ornamental bromeliads.

Ball moss is closely related to Spanish moss, but ball moss has a roundish "ball" shape and Spanish moss tends to hang down like an "old man's beard."

Ball moss (*Tillandsia recurvata*) is an epiphyte, which means that it grows on other plants but does not take nutrients from them. The "hold fasts" or "pseudo roots" of ball moss anchor it to the surface on which it grows. Unlike true roots, the false roots do not take up water and nutrients. The leaves and stems of ball moss, like those of other bromeliads, absorb water and nutrients from the air. This characteristic has earned bromeliads the nickname of "air plants."

Ball moss grows well in areas with low light intensity, low air movement, and high relative humidity. Such conditions are found under the canopy of many shade trees. Trees tend to grow most of their foliage at the ends of limbs while the interior of the canopy is bare. This makes the large interior limbs of live oaks and other large trees the ideal habitat for ball moss.

The native range of ball moss includes southern Texas, but the moss is moved throughout the state on transplanted trees. A series of mild winters, such as occurred during the late 1990s, helped these transplanted populations of ball moss become established and expanded the range of ball moss to new areas. Local spread of ball moss occurs by windblown seed.

Homeowners do not need to become concerned at seeing prolific growth of ball moss on a declining tree. Ball moss is not “killing” the tree. Ball moss is not a parasite and it does not take nutrients from the tree on which it is growing.

Some experts believe that heavy infestations of ball moss could cause shading of lower limbs, increased limb breakage from added weight, or reduced production of new shoots. These are areas of minor concern.

The most significant effects of ball moss on landscape trees are cosmetic. Some homeowners prefer to have ball moss and consider it as adding “character” to the tree. Other homeowners believe ball moss detracts from the tree’s natural beauty. The decision to control ball moss depends on the homeowner’s personal taste and whether or not control warrants the effort and expense.

One way to manage ball moss is by mechanical removal. This can be done manually or with a high-pressure water spray. Use appropriate safety precautions if manual

removal is used. If high-pressure water is used, hot water is not recommended because it can damage the tree.

Copper-containing fungicides can kill ball moss. Kocide® 101, 4.5LF, DF, and 2000 are copper-containing fungicides currently labeled for ball moss management on live oak and, in most cases, pecan trees. Fungicide should be applied in the spring (March and April) when ball moss is actively growing, and all label instructions must be followed carefully. Even though the ball moss may be killed, it will not immediately drop off the tree. It will fall off slowly over the course of the year.

If a copper-containing fungicide is used, drift can be a problem that increases with the size of the trees being treated. Kocide® may be injurious to ornamentals grown underneath the sprayed trees, and the product may react with metal surfaces such as automobiles, lawn furniture and metal roofing. Copper fungicides will leave a blue stain on surfaces they contact, so use care when spraying near buildings or other surfaces.

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