

## **FACT SHEET: Spanish Moss: Love It, Hate It or In-Between!**

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*(Adapted from Nancy P. Army's publication: Spanish Moss and Ball Moss, University of Florida, Pub. FOR 52)*

Years ago, while living in the tundra and vacationing in Florida, I was intrigued by the look of Spanish moss. And today, while walking through our yards and driving through our developments, it's apparent...Spanish moss is definitely here – in our trees and falling into our landscapes. And, yes, I really liked Spanish moss more in my intrigue stage than in my clean it out of the trees stage!

Spanish moss is a Florida native member of the pineapple family. It is a perennial herb, so it doesn't have permanent woody stems above ground. Plants live for years and reproduce without our intervention. Like many other bromeliads, these plants are epiphytes or "air plants" and aren't parasitic. They don't need soil for their roots and can survive by hanging from tree branches. Spanish moss has the capacity to use minerals dissolved in the water which flows across leaves and down branches.

There are a couple downsides to heavy infestations of Spanish moss: potential for significant shade competition and limb breakage. But, before we rush out to eradicate these prehistoric-looking plants, let's consider the ecological benefits. Many animals use Spanish moss as a protective cover. Many insects and other invertebrates hide in moss masses. "Red bugs", chiggers, spiders, and thrips hide in the moss. At least two species of bats use Spanish moss for cover and as a day-time rest stop. Several bird species use Spanish moss as a significant nest component: the parula warbler and the Baltimore oriole.

Spanish moss prefers well-lighted, moist habitats and fairly high humidity. It commonly grows on live oak trees since they have nearly horizontal branches. The greener the plant, the healthier the environment. Dead portions look like black horsehair and were once used as furniture and automobile seat stuffing. The plant reproduces vegetative growth and seeds that are dispersed between December and March. A single flower on each plant usually blooms in April. The yellow-green blossoms are relatively inconspicuous, have a pleasant, subtle fragrance when massed together, last about four days, then develop a seed capsule which opens in December or January, releasing 2 to 23 seeds.

Chemical control is possible. As of 1996, the following materials are licensed for control of Spanish moss: TC Tribasic Copper Sulphate, Blue Shield, Basic Copper 53, Micro Flo Basic Copper 53, and Micro Flo Copper 3 FL. Note that there is evidence that copper-based herbicides and fungicides may cause damage to tender growth on oak trees. As with all herbicides, when using these materials, read, then re-read and follow label directions carefully. **If you are going to hire a professional for chemical control methods, be sure you contact companies who have their BMP (Best Management Practices) certification and applicable pesticide licenses.**

Hand removal of Spanish moss is possible and can be done successfully on small trees by standing on a ladder or using a pole. **As always, be sure you are following ladder safety practices!** I have even used a rake while standing on the ground and removed a significant amount of moss which I then put in my yard waste recycling. For larger trees, a basket-truck or "cherry-picker" is probably needed. You can usually restore the tree to a more attractive and healthier condition by removing the moss and pruning the branches that have been light-deprived.

For assistance with horticultural questions, call the Master Gardener Help Desk at the Hillsborough County Extension Service, located in Seffner: 813 744-5519 X7. More gardening information is available at <http://hillsborough.extension.ufl.edu> and <http://edis.ifas.ufl.edu>