

SPANISH MOSS

Symbol of the Southland

by A.S. Jensen

To the native Floridian, Spanish moss (*Tillandsia usneoides*) is part of the Florida scenery and is often taken for granted. To many newcomers and visitors, however, this strange air plant is a subject of much speculation and wonder.

Contrary to what people believe, Spanish moss does not injure the tree by obtaining any nourishment from it. Being an air plant, it only uses the tree for support. Live oaks especially seem well-suited for harboring this strange plant and most Florida live oaks of any size have at least some Spanish moss. But many tree species harbor this plant. Healthy moss is often seen growing on dead trees, fences and power lines as well.

When I was a little girl, and we were traveling home to Florida, our family always had a contest to see who would be the first to spot a bit of Spanish moss in the trees. That always meant that we were back in the South again, and nearly home.

• Peggy S. Lantz

Spanish moss occurs in all Florida counties, but is very common to very rare depending on the location. It is also widely distributed from southern Virginia to eastern Texas along the coastal strip of the southeastern United States. Ball moss (*Tillandsia recurvata*) is sometimes confused with Spanish moss, but is a small tufted, soft, greenish-gray plant. Often the two species are found growing in the same tree.

Damage to Trees

Although Spanish moss does not take its nourishment from the tree, it can sometimes cause tree damage when weak limbs become heavily laden with moss and break off. The



Spanish moss conjures up visions of the Old South, ante bellum homes, and shady driveways.

foliage of small branches may sometimes be smothered too.

Spanish moss causes the most trouble in economic crop trees such as pecans and citrus. In shade trees, however, people usually remove it because they do not like it, not because of any damage it might do.

Life history

Spanish moss is a flowering plant belonging to the pineapple family. The strands sprout from a seed that is equipped with a feathery parachute which floats through the air until it lodges on a tree trunk or other suitable seed bed. Several strands may grow simultaneously from one seed. Strands and minute pieces of moss carried by wind or birds to suitable locations also grow into new festoons. Hurricanes are said to spread moss. Being an epiphyte (air plant), Spanish moss gets its nourishment from rainwater and air, absorbing great quantities of moisture, but it can live up to two years without rain. Probably dust in the air also supplies some of its

nourishment. Studies have shown that moss contains the same proportions of certain chemicals as the surrounding air.

Uses

In former times, moss had a variety of uses. It stuffed everything from car cushions to horse collars, but was mainly used in furniture manufacturing. At one period there were 35 moss plants operating in Florida. Green moss was gathered and cured by wetting it down and packing it in trenches or pits. It usually remained in the pit for six to eight months, during which time the outer covering rotted off, leaving the inner strand. Then it was taken to the moss factory where it was

continued next page

FLORIDA NATIVE PLANT SOCIETY FALL MEMBERS' MEETING

Saturday, Nov. 13, 10:00 A.M.

Plantation Inn, Crystal River

(See page 3.)

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SPANISH MOSS ————— from page 1

sorted and cleaned and baled for shipment. Quite a few Floridians made at least a part-time living from collecting moss. Many old moss pickers now collect aluminum cans.

The last operating moss factory in Florida (or, in fact, the South) was located in Gainesville. This factory burned in 1958 and did not reopen. Thus another unique industry belongs to the ages!

The early Spanish explorers, it is said, tried using the moss for bedding. They piled it up, thinking it would make a soft mattress to sleep on. But Spanish moss is infested with that tiny mite called the chigger, or redbug, or names we can't print here. I expect those Spanish soldiers spent the next week trying to scratch under their armor, and calling the bugs some of those unprintable names.

P.S.L.

Redbugs in moss

Spanish moss has the reputation of being a favorite habitat of the infamous Florida redbug or chigger. Actually, these small biting creatures are found mostly in low damp places where vegetation is rank. Fallen moss often has redbugs, as do the grass and bushes in the same vicinity. Moss hanging from trees more than a few feet above the ground, however, seldom has chiggers.

The boll weevil, destroyer of cotton crops, selects the festoons of Spanish moss as its winter home, according to an authorized report.

It has many names, besides its official name. "Old man's beard" is the most picturesque one, and we used to play with it as a beard when we were children. Sometimes it is called long moss, and long it is, sometimes growing in twenty-foot tangles. It is sometimes called Florida moss. Though commonly called Spanish moss, it doesn't come from Spain, and it isn't even a moss. P.S.L.

Moss die-back and decline

About 1968, a lethal stem and leaf blight of Spanish moss was noted in several areas of Florida. In general, this moss die-back was observed in a band from Bradenton northeast to Jacksonville and Cumberland Island, Georgia.

It was determined after study that a species of fungus (*Fusarium solani*) was responsible. Apparently this is a natural occurrence and does no lasting damage to the moss supply. Within five years after this blight kills the moss in a particular area, it comes back so thick one might never realize it was even killed. Moss does seem to be declining in some areas of our state because the older trees containing the moss have been cut and no other moss is growing nearby to furnish strands or seed to re-establish festoons in young trees.

In the mid 1960s, Winter Park and Orange County generally had very heavy growths of Spanish moss on many species of trees, especially oaks and cypresses. Since the die-back, however, it has never been as prolific.

A call to several tree service companies produced this information:

- Spanish moss has not recovered in Central Florida to 1960s' levels of abundance. Very few people now consider it a problem. Almost all the "demossing" business is for removing ball moss, a close relative that is doing very well, especially on bare limbs or trunks.

- The reason Spanish moss has not recovered is "pollution," according to everyone we talked to.

- All tree companies spokesmen agreed that Spanish moss is no threat to trees at this time.

• Bill Partington

Maybe we shouldn't take it so much for granted any more.

BIRDS USE MOSS

Herb Kale of Florida Audubon says that birds use Spanish moss for both food and housing. The Parula warbler builds his canopy nest in hanging drapes of moss from Orlando northward. The Yellow-throated warbler uses Spanish moss in its nest, and is found raising its young from Lake Okeechobee northward. The Painted bunting uses moss, and breeds from Jacksonville north. Farther north, but still in the range of Spanish moss, robins and pine warblers line their nests with it.

Other birds use it for food: tufted titmice, Carolina chickadees, and many other birds eat the tiny seeds.

Tony Jensen added a note to his article that said: "I have a couple of times found seminoe bats (*Lasiurus seminolus*) sleeping in moss clumps at our Doe Lake 4-H Camp."

Some of us think it is beautiful, but for other, smaller species it is life-supporting.



Drawing by Dorie Karl DAK '82

Books on drawing often have pages with lines on them showing different moods: jagged lines mean power, diagonal lines mean motion, and vertical lines show peace and calm. I often think of those artistic lines when I am among hanging bunches of Spanish moss. To me there is nothing quite so peaceful as a grove of old oaks draped with clusters of this strange plant. P.S.L.