

The Misunderstood Ball Moss

Tillandsia recurvata is a small, non-descript plant commonly found in Southwest Texas. Ironically, although this plant benefits the environment by “fixing” atmospheric nitrogen, much like alfalfa and clover, it is despised and eagerly eradicated. Most of us know this plant of ill repute as ball moss.

Ball moss is not a moss, but a true plant with flowers and seeds. A member of the Bromeliad family, which includes the pineapple, ball moss is an *epiphyte*. Epiphytes attach themselves to limbs, tree trunks, power lines, picket fences, and many other structures with their pseudo-roots. These are not true roots because they do not absorb water and minerals; they merely attach the plant to an aerial structure. Therefore, since epiphytes do not pilfer nutrients and water from their host, they are not parasites.

Because ball moss survives by absorbing water and nutrients from the surrounding atmosphere through its leaves and stem, it prefers locales that have little air movement and high relative humidity. The growth habit and thick canopy of the live oak tree provides ideal habitats.

Live oaks develop a type of canopy that is often described as “monolayer”, that is, very thick on the exterior but quite open in the interior. This results in a low light, high humidity situation, which is ideally suited for ball moss. As a result, ball moss is most often found on the dead interior branches of old live oaks. However, it is erroneous to believe that ball moss kills these interior branches. These branches die for the very same reason that the ball moss prefers the interior canopy—lack of sunlight. Likewise, branches, which seem to be “smothered” by ball moss, would inevitably die as a result of changing light intensity and tree physiology.

For those who simply cannot stand the thought of ball moss being benign or worse, possessing potential benefits, the recommended method to reduce a ball moss “infestation” is by pruning all the deadwood and thinning the canopy every five years, a practice consistent with proper tree maintenance, or by spraying with a fungicide, Kocide 101, for two consecutive Springs. Neither of these practices will remove all the ball moss, but they will benefit the tree and certainly make you feel better.

*The source for this **GVST Gardening Guide** is Mark Peterson, local Staff Forester with the Texas Forest Service. He is also the manager of the Oak Wilt Suppression Project for 10 South Texas counties. For more information about Texas Trees—from selection to planting and care, check the Texas Forest website at www.tfs.tamu.edu.*

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