

What's That Ball Shape Moss Growing on My Tree?

Oh! Relax, it's just ball moss. Working as an extension agent, one of my most frequently asked questions is, will the ball moss kill my trees? My answer is always no, it is not hurting the trees. The client follow-up question is, "then why all the branches with ball moss dying?" My answer to that question is, "if you take a close look at the branches that are dying you will realize that most of the branches are inside the canopy." Most likely, those inside branches die from insufficient sunlight; ball moss thrives very well in an environment of low sunlight and high humidity. We could look at the ball moss as an opportunist looking for somewhere to live. It is important to note that ball moss is an epiphyte and not a parasite. This means that ball moss gets their food from the air and does not feed on the tree; they only use the tree as a host or for support.

Ball moss tarnishes the appearance of the trees by making trees look unkempt and unmaintained. If the exterior branches are heavily covered with moss then the burden can be reduced by pruning, picking, or spraying. In many cases spraying the tree with an insecticide to control moss is not practical for homeowners because of the height of the trees. If the spraying option is selected, this may require a tree professional with a motorized sprayer that can make a foliar application to the entire tree from top to bottom. A copper fungicide such as Kocide is proven to provide adequate control. Wind and rain usually will remove fungicide from branches; therefore fungicide does not work best without combining with pruning. Pruning away affected branches can be risky when climbing on a ladder at great height; therefore you are encouraged to hire an arborist. Finally, picking of ball moss involves physically removing each ball; it can be very dangerous, tedious, and discouraging. Maintaining trees by pruning the inner branches will reduce the incidence of moss.

Ball moss is very common on oak trees that are growing in shade and not full sunlight. Please note that full sun refers to 8 hours of exposure to sunlight. In addition, trees that are planted close to each other often experience ball moss, therefore it is important to contact UF/IFAS Extension in Osceola County for tree spacing recommendations.

For more information on landscaping and other related horticulture topics, contact Grantly Ricketts with UF/IFAS Extension in Osceola County at 321-697-3000 or email gricketts@ufl.edu.