Spanish moss drapes old oaks adding character and charm to southern landscapes. A relative, ball moss, grows in clumps on tree and shrub branches. Both are often falsely accused of killing the plant they grow on. Both are harmless epiphytes or air plants. They don't harm trees and no control is warranted.

Ball moss and Spanish moss are Tillandisias, types of bromeliads not true mosses. There are many colorful bromeliads sold for landscaping and interior decorating. Drab grey-green ball moss has made its way across the county dressed up and stuffed in rocks and shells, sold to many a tourist as a piece of Florida. Spanish moss is commonly used to decorate nick-nacs, crafts and wreaths.

Some bromeliads are rare and are protected from collectors by strict state laws. Ball moss and Spanish moss, on the other hand are quite common and a part of the character of Florida.

These two air plants are frequently noticed growing on sick or dying trees and there is the misconception that they are the cause of the problem. Science has not proven any detrimental effects to the tree caused by these plants.

Frequently, old limbs are found on the ground after a storm and it is assumed that the moss killed the limbs. The fact is that the weight of wet moss can break out weak, dead or damaged limbs. I am not familiar with any situation where a healthy limb crashed to the ground with the weight of wet moss.

Ball moss is commonly noticed on thin or sick looking trees. As the trees thin, more light is let into the interior of the plant and more moss grows. Ball moss does produce roots, but they merely act to glue the plant to the outer layer of tree bark, not into the living tissue of the tree trunk or limbs. Ball moss can be seen growing on concrete poles, fence posts and even power lines.

Knowing that the moss is harmless is a relief to many. What if you just don't like the looks of it even if it is not causing problems to the tree? Costly sprays to kill the moss are unjustified, perhaps illegal depending on county occupational and state pesticide license laws. Even if a product is safe and kills the moss, you will probably consider dead moss at least as unsightly as the live moss.

Labor not spray is the answer. Instead of spending money for an unnecessary spray, hire someone to hand pull the moss from the trees. Be sure they are locally licensed and provide you with proof of workers compensation insurance for the job. Don't let them climb the tree with spikes, since they injure the tree. Safety is a major concern for you and the worker, so be sure all precautions are taken.

If you notice the moss and feel the trees are having problems, try to identify what may be weakening the plants. For help in diagnosing problems, call the Osceola County Extension Plant Clinic at (321) 697-3000. Master Gardener volunteers are on duty Monday to Friday from 10 am to 2 pm to help with plant questions. If these times are inconvenient, drop off samples and they will call you with information. The Osceola County Extension office is located at 1921 Kissimmee Valley Lane next to the rodeo grounds.
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