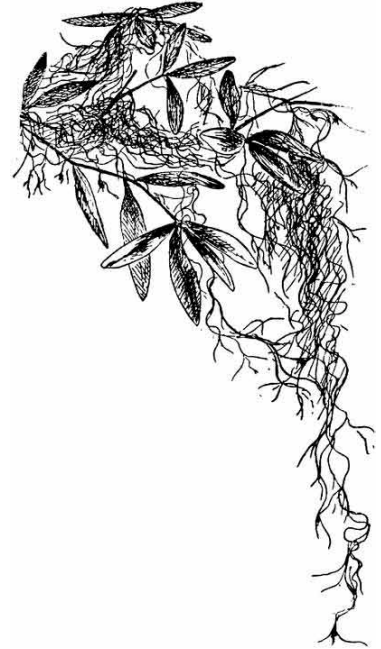


Spanish moss

Spanish moss, *Tillandsia usneoides*, is not a true moss, but rather a rootless epiphyte in the *Bromeliaceae* family and closely related to the pineapple. It does not parasitize its host, but rather uses the host only for supporting its slender stems and foliage. Its stems, about 1/25 of an inch in diameter and up to 50 inches in length, are elongated, twining and covered with silvery-gray scales. The short, 1 to 2 1/2 inches in length, round leaves appear at numerous intervals. The silvery-gray scales, called trichomes, serve two major purposes. The first is the absorption of water and nutrients. The second is to help reflect intense sunlight off of the leaf surface.



Its flowers appear singly and inconspicuously on a 1/2 inch long stalk in the leaf axil. The petals are yellowish-green with recurved tips. Two long bracts of unequal length extend beyond the flower. Flowers appear mostly in April to June, and sporadically throughout the summer. The seed capsule is 1/2 to 1 inch in length and spine tipped.

Many animals make use of Spanish moss. The Northern yellow bat, as well as other *Lasiurus*, uses it as a roost and a nursery for its young. Carolina wrens also use it to sleep in, as well as to search for food in. Swallow-tailed kites, as well as many other birds, use it in constructing their nests. Squirrels also use it as a nest building material.

Florida's Indians used Spanish moss for making cordage, bedding, as a binder for clay pots (to prevent them from cracking during firing), and added to the clay daubed on the outside of certain houses. It was used to some extent when green, but for the compact twisting of cordage it had to be processed. The Indians processed it by placing it in a shallow pond for six weeks after which time the outer layer rotted away. The end result was a black stringy fiber. The women also used it for skirts with the processed fibers woven into a type of fabric or in its original form.

Early in this century collecting and preparing Spanish moss for industrial use was a million dollar industry in the state of Florida. The moss was used after processing, in much the same way the Indians processed it, for stuffing upholstery and mattresses.

It is still used as stuffing material to some extent today. Crafters use it, unprocessed but sterilized, in flower arrangements and other creations. It also makes a great mulch for flowerbeds.

by Sharon LaPlante

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