

Moss Gardening—A Low-Maintenance Option for Shade

Most people have that shady patch in their yard where they can't grow grass but moss is abundant. Products and techniques are promoted for the intent purpose of eradicating this primitive member of the plant kingdom. Before you eradicate moss, consider its potential in the landscape. If you haven't noticed mosses before, now is the time that they stand out in the gray and brown landscape with their wonderful shades of green.

Mosses evolved over 390 million years ago, and there are currently over 15,000 varieties of moss worldwide. Wisconsin has close to 400 native species of moss, and the odds are that you have some of these on your property as well. Mosses have been used for thousands of years in Japanese gardens for the effects of adding serenity and timeless beauty. Public moss gardens exist throughout the United States, although some of the best can be found in the Pacific Northwest. Many gardeners have utilized sphagnum moss as a soil amendment or to line hanging baskets. However, bogs around the world have been drained and depleted of their sphagnum moss to satiate gardening demand. Consider other materials that accomplish the same goals.

These tiny plants don't produce flowers and don't have actual roots that draw up any nutrients or water. Mosses have minute ducts that open when moistened and become dormant with the lack of moisture and then become active when moistened. Some mosses can remain dormant for years until adequately moistened. Mosses do have chlorophyll and do photosynthesize regardless of the temperature (hence their green color, even in winter). Mosses carry no diseases and, despite popular belief, are not parasites on other plants.

Once established, mosses can be a wonderful component of your shady areas. If you can't grow grass in a particular area, there is a reason for that. Learn from your frustrations and go with the resilient, virtually maintenance-free option of mosses. Whether it's a moss lawn or a composition of different mosses used in tandem with your other shade garden plants, the decision to incorporate mosses into your landscape can be very rewarding.

Establishing mosses is the most important step in moss gardening. Observe mosses where they are currently growing on your property or in natural areas to get an idea of their preferred habitats. The majority of mosses prefer no direct sunlight and prefer an acidic soil (pH between 5.0 and 5.5), although they will grow in a wide range of soil types. As they have no true roots, mosses will grow on logs, rocks and even on concrete or clay planters. There are essentially two popular ways of establishing moss in your landscape.

The ideal moss planting time is from late March until mid-June and from September to November. The summer months are simply too hot and dry to successfully establish moss, although sufficient moisture is the primary consideration. Transplanting patches of moss is the most popular method. Collecting in early spring immediately after a rain will increase your success, as they are easier to loosen and have maximum moisture content. It is important to stress that moss should never be collected from public areas, natural areas, state forests, etc. as they are an important part of those ecosystems. When collecting from acceptable areas, never take more than a small 3" by 3" piece from each square foot of moss. Lightly loosen these patches and keep them damp. Never roll up moss patches. Collecting in this "patchwork" fashion will allow the remaining moss to colonize open areas readily.

Before planting moss "patches" in the garden, create a clear, bare, surface free of leaves, weeds and other debris. You may need or want to acidify the soil to promote optimum pH for establishing mosses. The soil should be tamped down and compacted (not loosened) before planting. Gently scratch this area with a rake and spray area until it is damp. Moisten the bottom of collected moss fragments and gently press these on the selected site, firmly enough to remove air pockets under the patch. Use small sticks to secure patches to slopes. Mist these patches with water from a spray bottle twice daily for three weeks. Mist as needed through the growing season to keep

moss slightly damp. These patches will double in size within one year or so. Keep your moss garden free of fallen leaves and debris and limit foot traffic to stepping stones or paths. Moss is not resilient to repeated foot traffic or disturbance.

Another method of moss establishment is typically used when moss is desired on rocks or containers. Take moss patches and remove all dirt or rock particles from the underside. Mix a handful of moss with 1 cup of buttermilk in the blender for two minutes. This “moss slurry” can then be smeared or painted over the desired area. The ability of moss to regenerate cell by cell will allow it to grow from this concoction. Continue to mist twice daily until you see a fuzzy haze of green indicating new growth. The appearance of moss on containers or rocks lends an “antique” feeling to the garden.

What mosses don’t achieve in height and floral display in your landscape they make up in durability and low-maintenance once established. No longer the bane of shady turf areas under trees, mosses are a wonderful component of the home landscape and their potential is just starting to become realized. The next time you are in the woods, enjoy this member of plant kingdom and appreciate that what it has been doing for our ecosystems and landscapes for millions of years can be easily enjoyed at home.

—Mark Dwyer, Janesville Rotary Gardens

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