

LOUISIANA PLANT PATHOLOGY

DISEASE IDENTIFICATION AND MANAGEMENT SERIES



Ball Moss

Tillandsia recurvata

Like Spanish moss, ball moss is an epiphyte and belongs to family *Bromeliaceae*.

Ball moss [*Tillandsia recurvata* (L.) L], or an air plant, is not a true moss but rather is a small flowering plant. It is neither a pathogen nor a parasite.

During the past couple of years, ball moss has increasingly been colonizing trees and shrubs, including oaks, pines, magnolias, crape myrtles, Bradford pears and others on the Louisiana State University campus and surrounding areas in Baton Rouge. In addition to trees and shrubs, ball moss can attach itself to fences, electric poles and other physical structures with the help of pseudo-roots.

Ball moss uses trees or plants as surfaces to grow on but does not derive any nutrients or water from them. Ball moss is a true plant and can prepare its own food by using water vapors and nutrient from the environment.

Extending from Georgia to Arizona and Mexico, ball moss thrives in high humidity and low intensity sunlight environments. Unlike loose, fibrous Spanish moss, ball moss grows in a compact shape of a ball ranging in size from a golf ball to a soccer ball.

Ball moss leaves are narrow and grayish-green, with pointed tips that curve outward from the center of the ball. It gets its mosslike appearance from the trichomes present on the leaves. Blue to violet flowers emerge on long central stems during spring. Ball moss spreads to new locations both through wind-dispersed seeds and movement of small vegetative parts of the plant.

Ball moss may colonize both healthy and stressed trees but is more visible on stressed trees. Heavy infestation of ball moss may break small twigs or limbs of the trees. It also may stress the host indirectly by restricting the surface area for new sprouts or growth.

Management of ball moss generally is not required, particularly if trees or shrubs are lightly



Figure 1. Young ball moss plant.



Figure 2. Mature ball moss plant with seed head.

infested. Trees completely covered with ball moss will need proper care to combat ball moss.

Although labor intensive, hand picking is the most effective method to remove ball moss from lightly infested small trees or shrubs. Pruning twigs and branches covered with ball moss may restore the affected trees. Chemical control of ball moss also is possible, and copper-containing fungicides may provide adequate control. If chemical control

is warranted, choose a product that is labeled for ball moss control. Read the label carefully to apply the recommended dose and follow other directions to use the product. Excessive use of copper-containing products may cause injury to the host plant. Good cultural practices that promote vigorously growing healthy trees with dense canopies also are recommended.



Figure 3. Crape myrtle branches heavily infested with ball moss on LSU campus.

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