

## Ball Moss –Free Bromeliads!

Doug Caldwell, Commercial Landscape Horticulture



A ball moss seedling (left) is getting a start with a few aerial rootlets. It will develop into a "family" of plants (right) about the size of a tennis ball. Note long flower stalks, shooting out with small reddish-violet heads.

People often get concerned about large numbers of ball moss (*Tillandsia recurvata*) or its cousin, Spanish moss (*T. usneoides*), accumulating on their oak tree branches. In SW Florida, it seems that we have more ball moss than Spanish moss for some yet to be discovered reason. Spanish moss is more abundant in north Florida through the Carolinas. Ball moss is not a true moss, but rather a small bromeliad or air plant. It grows in clumps of multiple plants forming a 5 to 7 inch diameter ball of gray, narrow curving stems and stiff leaves. Flowers are spindly and inconspicuous, until one looks really close and observes the blue to reddish-violet flowers. These plants do well with low to moderate light intensity and need periods of high humidity to obtain mineral nourishment from the air and run-off from the tree.

Ball moss does very well on oak trees, but now and then the sticky, air-borne seeds end up on a fence wire, utility lines or other structure. Although this air plant (epiphyte) develops root structures (pseudo-roots) that may penetrate the outer bark, which is dead tissue, they do not parasitize trees; they simply use them for support. Ball moss probably plays some important ecological roles, both in nutrient recycling and a habitat resource for certain birds and insects.

**What To Do:** Nothing! Ball moss does not need to be removed from the plants that it settles on. Some chemical products (copper based) may be labeled for spraying to "control" ball moss, but these are desiccants that, used at the wrong time of year, may cause some damage to tender oak buds or foliage. These chemicals can be eye irritants also. Plus, the dead ball moss still needs to be manually removed, as it doesn't shrivel up and drop off. So, the best approach is to just enjoy these miniatures of the pineapple family and watch for their little flowers which can be found this time of year. See more info on native bromeliads at: <http://edis.ifas.ufl.edu/pdf/files/UW/UW20500.pdf> .

Doug Caldwell, Ph.D., is the commercial landscape horticulture extension agent and landscape entomologist with the University of Florida Collier County Extension Service. The Cooperative Extension Service is an off-campus branch of the University of Florida, Institute of the Food and Agricultural Sciences and a department of the Public Services Division of Collier County government. E-mail [dougbug@ufl.edu](mailto:dougbug@ufl.edu); phone, 353-4244 x203. Extension programs are open to all persons without regard to race, color, creed, sex, handicap or national origin. For updates on Southwest Florida Horticulture visit: <http://collier.ifas.ufl.edu>