

Article Submission

Publication: Grand Gardens Magazine	Author: Tim Perry
Contact: Juliette Cowall	Address: 1526 Scott Creek Dr. Belmont, MI 49306
Topic: Moss Gardening	Phone: (616) 784-6791 (home)
Submitted: May 17, 2006	E-Mail: tperry123@att.net

Made in the shade A moss gardening primer

It's a daunting challenge. Deeply shaded patches of landscape often resist all attempts at "proper" cultivation. Grasses grow thinly, if at all. Fertilization and aeration fail. Despite endless primping, priming and preparation, the only thing that seems to thrive in these perennially dim areas is... egad...moss!

But hold up! Why try to cajole nature from its comfort zone? Imagine a thick, barefoot-friendly carpet of lush greenery that grows where nothing else seems willing or able. No mowing, de-thatching or pesticides. Precious little weeding, watering or maintenance. Hardly even sounds like gardening, does it? It's enough to lure anyone toward the Dark Side!

Lifelong gardener Julia Donker of Jennison, MI is in her third season of actively cultivating mosses. At first, her husband wanted nothing of a moss garden. "He said it would tell the neighbors we have lousy soil!"

But Julia appreciates the subtleties. "They're so serene. I love the colors and textures. When the mosses have grown in, kids can play on them. You can walk all over them. They're tough."

Mosses are members of the phylum *Bryophyta*, as are liverworts and hornworts. They possess no water or food carrying systems. Nutrients and water are absorbed directly through the plant mass. They also have no true roots. Instead, threadlike rhizomes act as anchors. Mosses reproduce by way of alternating generations, with a leafy growing stage followed by a spore-bearing phase.

Basic needs.

Mosses need deep shade, but dappled sunlight is okay. Perhaps an hour or two of early morning light. Naturally damp soils are best, but even hit-or-miss rain can maintain a healthy colony. Most prefer a soil pH of 4.5 to 6.5. Prime time is 5.5.

Shane VanOosterhout is Master Gardener Coordinator at the Ottawa County MSU Extension office in Grand Haven. He doesn't accept the common belief that moss is somehow a negative. "Moss grows on turf that's either too shady for

grass, or is heavily compacted. It's not a pernicious weed, not invasive, nor does it ruin turf grass. Moss on slopes or bare areas is pretty and helps prevent erosion. Under trees, moss will not endanger the trees and as it fills in, will crowd out weeds."

Mosses can be coerced into colonizing rock faces, fences, masonry and statues. Astute gardeners grow them among boulders, ponds, shaded slopes, patios and pathways. The Japanese have long used mosses to soften the earth's contours in their peerlessly tranquil gardens.

Cultivation Basics.

"Moss spores are everywhere. I've found that by making the conditions right, a lot of times they grow right in all by themselves." says Ms. Donker. But that's the long way home. The most common method is transplantation.

The site should be meticulously scraped and weeded, providing a completely bare, compacted surface. Amend the soil as necessary to achieve the ideal 5.5 pH level and water thoroughly. Mosses can then be laid where they are to grow, and pressed into place.

Julie maintains, "Mosses really love solid contact with the ground. I step on new transplants with my feet. Hard. It doesn't hurt them." Plants must then be kept moist for several weeks thereafter to ensure proper establishment.

Beyond basic planting: The Moss Slurry.

For hard surfaces like rocks, boulders, pottery or masonry, combine whole moss plants with water, stale beer or buttermilk, plus a dash of water retention gel. When churned in a blender, the resulting slurry can be painted on surfaces or bare soil.

INSET:

West Michigan-friendly Mosses

Rock Cap Moss (Dicranum)

Good for large area coverage. Grows on rocks or soil.

Pincushion Moss (Leucobryum)

Prefers sandy soil and shade, but tolerates partial sun. Whitish, looks like a pincushion

Haircap Moss (Polytrichum)

Medium shade to partial sun. Dark green.

Fern or Feather Moss (Thuidium)

Versatile, low growing. Thrives in shade, tolerates dappled sunlight.

Star Moss (Atrichum)

Dark green, upright starry appearance.

Plant Sources

Regrettably, moss nurseries are few and far between. Pennsylvania and the Pacific Northwest are home to retail suppliers with selections appropriate for West Michigan. Sources can be researched on the internet. Local gardening retailers occasionally stock mosses, but call around. They're not at all common.

Native Collection

Julia is a big fan of collecting. "Exact identification can be tough, even with a microscope. What's really important is how well the conditions in nature match conditions in your garden. I always bring back some of the native soil with the moss. Or I'll just bring back the rock it's growing on."

Ask friends, relatives and neighbors for permission to collect specimens on their properties. Owners of land slated for development are often happy to allow collection of plants that would otherwise fall to the bulldozer's blade.

INSET:

Companion plants

Maidenhair fern	(<i>Adiantum</i>)
Ebony spleenwort	(<i>Asplenium</i>)
Wild Ginger	(<i>Hexasyllis</i>)
Hosta	(<i>Hosta</i>)
Bluets	(<i>Houstonia</i>)
Partridgeberry	(<i>Mitchella</i>)
Dwarf spirea	(<i>Spirea</i>)

Maintenance

Aside from removing the occasional stray weed, upkeep is blissfully minimal. Leaves and debris must be removed when they accumulate. A leaf blower works nicely, as does gentle raking or brooming.

Most varieties can withstand light to moderate foot traffic. Indeed, they fairly well beg to be trodden upon with bare toes, providing a sensuous pleasure exclusive to moss gardeners.

Gardening in heavy shade has always presented special challenges. Instead of resisting the natural order, embrace it. Moss gardening can be a remarkably entertaining and *enlightening* experience.

About the author:

Tim Perry of Belmont, MI is a freelance writer and longtime naturalist with an education in Forestry gained at Michigan Tech, Houghton. He likens the rewards and frustrations of gardening to raising teenagers. *“They both require time, patience and nurturing, but plants never want to borrow the car.”*

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