

Toledo Blade, Garden Article

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Is Moss Your Friend or Foe?

You have probably all heard the expression, “*You either love it or you hate it.*” I feel like this is a perfect phrase when it comes to moss in the landscape. Recently, the Extension Office has received several phone calls from residents wanting to rid their lawns and landscapes of moss. Simultaneously, I have heard from gardeners who love them and want more. My point – *you love them or your hate them!*

It is interesting to note that there are thousands of moss species worldwide. Mosses are simple plants that lack typical leaves, shoots and seed forming systems like other plants in our yards and gardens. While they maybe consider simple, they are some of the toughest and most persistent – if given the right environment.

While considered a pest by many, they do provide both ecological and aesthetic values. Mosses can be a bio-indicator of air and water pollution. Studies have shown that they are one of the first plants to respond to acid rain. Their decline can also indicate other negative changes in the environment. Mosses act as a great erosion control and help retain moisture and nutrients in the soil, and in the right place, they can add color and texture to the garden and be a great addition to the landscape.

If you have moss, whether you like it or not, you likely have one or more of these conditions:

- poorly drained, saturated, or persistently wet soils
- a low pH or acidic soil conditions
- shade – usually the denser equals more moss
- compacted soils

If you are experiencing moss in the lawn or landscape, and are unhappy about it, addressing why other plants are not growing and out competing the moss is the first step. If you like the moss – no further steps are necessary and just enjoy.

If your goal is to be moss-less, the first question is “what is your soil pH?” If you are unsure, then a soil test is necessary. The test is easy to do and can be a real bargain for the amount of information you will receive about your soil. The lab results will not only help with this issue, but gives you a baseline of information that is valuable when choosing plants and determining if you need to fertilize, or if adequate nutrients are available for the plants to use.

The next question, “how is the drainage?” While many plants prefer a well-drained soil, mosses can tolerate and actually like moist conditions. With that said, our raining spring has leant itself to perfect moss-making conditions. If you already have moss, it is probably thriving. If you have never had moss, this might be the year.

And the final question, “how much sunlight does the area receive where your moss is thriving?” Mosses likes shade, while some plants, including turfgrass, do not. While removing established plants to increase sunlight availability is typically not recommended, or a well-received idea by gardeners, selective pruning can increase light penetration and often increase the health of the plants being pruned if done properly.

Compacted soils also give mosses a competitive advantage. If present in your lawn, consider aeration to alleviate the problem and improve turfgrass growing conditions as a means to increase the competitiveness and hopefully reduce the moss – if that is your goal!

Whether your intent is to grow or control, it is clear that the environment and site conditions will ultimately dictate your success when it comes to moss. There are no chemical controls that are absolute in their ability to selectively eradicate moss from the landscape. Similarly, if you desire to establish and grow moss in the landscape, there are specific requirements for soil, moisture, light, and limited traffic that must be met.

Physically removing moss with a rake is one way to reduce the presence, but it is nearly impossible to get every single piece of this very simple but prolific organism. Even if you remove all visible pieces and parts, there are likely spores already in the soil or they can be moved by wind or water. Just keep after it.

If you opt to enlist the help of an herbicide, carefully follow label directions in order to maximize product effectiveness and safety. Not all herbicides will work. Remember if the problems limiting turf or plant growth are not resolved, the moss will bounce right back following treatments.

So I need to do a poll – moss or no moss? Email me at [stone.91@osu.edu](mailto:stone.91@osu.edu) and let me know your preference.