

Is moss our friend or foe?

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This photo provided by Rizzoli Press shows moss-covered steps guarded by a pair of centuries-old Chinese dragons in Greenwood Gardens, Short Hills, N.J. The photograph is featured in the book 'Garden Wild: Wildflower Meadows, Prairie-Style Plantings, Rockeries, Ferneries, and Other Sustainable Designs Inspired by Nature' by Andre Baranowski.

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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.

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 may be considered 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 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 lent 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 like 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.

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. 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.

So, I need to do a poll — moss or no moss? Email me at stone.91@osu.edu and let me know your preference.