



Cultivation Notes

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Mosses: How to start a moss garden
by Christine Cook and Betsy Keiffer

Family: LYCOPODIACEAE

Japanese monks began creating moss gardens around their temples centuries ago, delighting in the sensuous appeal and Zen-like peace of these velvety carpets. Today, more and more American gardeners are perceiving the charm of moss, as well as its practicality. It never needs mowing, it grows by preference in poor, acid, compact soil, and it thrives in varying degrees of shade and humidity.

“How-to” information on the subject is frustratingly sparse; moss gardening here is in its infancy. So RIWPS is grateful to Christine Cook, a Connecticut garden designer who specializes in moss gardens, for taking the time to answer some frequently asked questions. She will be the principal speaker at the RIWPS Annual Meeting on March 11.



Q. *Is moss very difficult to grow?*

A. There are at least 1,200 different mosses in the U.S. (and possibly up to 15,000 worldwide). No one really knows everything about this primitive form of plant life. Some of these tiny spore-bearing plants are easier to grow than others, but the right site conditions are critical to success with all of them. Check the soil pH (5.5 is ideal) and amount of shade and humidity in the area. Be encouraged if any mosses are growing there naturally. It means the site is favorable and there is a good chance that spores from existing moss will land on it. Some mosses will grow in full sun, but they do not transplant easily and are labor-intensive to maintain because of encroaching weeds. Some mosses will grow only on rocks, bark, or even concrete, while others aren't in the least fussy.

Q. *How do you get moss to grow?*

A. If you have the patience to wait two years, airborne spores will probably produce moss on a site that is attractive to it: weed-free, usually acid, and moist. The second and quicker way is to transplant “plugs” of moss (roughly 2 x 2 inch squares) that are growing in similar conditions in the wild. So-called “pioneer” species, whose spores gravitate toward disturbed areas, are your best bet. One of these is *Dicranella heteromalla*, a woodland species; *Atrichum angostatum*, which likes dappled light, is another pioneer. Prepare its new home by wetting it to muddiness, preferably with ditch, pond, or bottled water. Massage the sods into this slurry, about two feet apart, making good contact between them and the slurry. In time, they should grow together, making a solid carpet. Water every day with a sprinkler for their first growing season. Once the moss is established and beginning to spread, watering once a week should be enough.

Q. *What is involved in maintaining a moss garden?*

A. Relentless weeding until the moss gets the upper hand. Once it is established you'll see fewer and fewer weeds. In autumn and winter it is important to keep sodden leaves from smothering it. If birds and small rodents rooting for food in the soil scratch up moss, press it back down. No one has any scientific evidence for why this treatment works, but a monthly spraying of buttermilk (1 quart buttermilk to 2 gallons of water) during the growing season definitely helps moss get established. If possible, spray on a cloudy day. Most mosses can take light foot traffic, but stepping stones are a good idea.

Q. *What is the best time of year to transplant moss?*

A. From late summer until the ground freezes. April is the worst time because the trees have not leafed out to provide shade. Ideal days are after a rainy spell.

Q. *What plants look good with mosses?*

A. Any that need the same growing conditions as moss and have the same daintiness of scale to complement rather than overwhelm the moss. Ferns are a good choice, as are small spring bulbs, native ginger, dwarf iris, creeping phlox, and several of the tiarellas.

Q. *Is it okay to transplant moss from wherever I find it?*

A. Do not collect moss from a preserve or property other than your own without written permission of the owner, and don't take pieces larger than the palm of your hand from any one site. It is permissible to "rescue" patches of moss from areas about to be bulldozed, with permission of the owner.

Q. *I don't know the names of any of the mosses. Is that a big handicap?*

A. Not necessarily. Mosses are not easy to identify, and their names are even harder to pronounce. It's more important to be sensitive to the kind of conditions you find them growing in and to be able to duplicate them in your garden.

Nursery Sources:

Sticks & Stones Farms, 197 Huntingtown Road, Newtown, CT 06470

Fax & phone: (203)270-8820; Web site: www.Sticks&StonesFarms.com

A variety of mosses, as well as "moss soil" (soil with a low pH and high iron content)

Tripple Brook Farm, 37 Middle Road, Southampton, MA 01073

Phone: (413)527-4626; Web site: www.tripplebrookfarm.com

References:

Glime, J.M. 1993. *The Elfin World of Mosses and Liverworts of Michigan's Upper Peninsula and Isle Royale*. Isle Royale Natural History Association. A good field guide.

Schenk, George. 1997. *Moss Gardening*. Timber Press, Inc. Portland, Oregon.
First book devoted to moss gardening.