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Metro  
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"What's the Matter with Moss?"  
Outreach Brochure

# "What's the Matter with Moss?"

How to live with it  
or remove it safely

## **Mossy carpet of green -- beauty or bother?**

Mosses are tiny plants that thrive in western Oregon's mild, wet winters. Starting with fall rains, they grow to form thick green mats on lawns and surfaces of all sorts -- roofs, decks, benches, sidewalks, tree trunks. Moss can make a surface slick and dangerous and can damage a roof's shingles, but it also can be a beautiful and carefree ground cover.

## LAWN MOSS

### **A sign of unhealthy grass**

Mosses flourish to form a velvety expanse of green in places where grass is not thriving, usually because of excessive shade, poor drainage or overwatering.

### **Leave it and enjoy**

The simplest solution is to appreciate the moss as a lovely, trouble-free green ground cover that is soft underfoot. Moss lawns are a key element in Oriental gardens and are being established worldwide. Like meadows, moss lawns are touted as alternative landscaping to attract birds and wildlife.

### **Prevent lawn moss by changing conditions**

Changing the conditions of your lawn can enhance grass growth and discourage moss. **Let the sun shine in.** Remove lower limbs from trees and shrubs to limit shady areas. **Promote good drainage.** Aerate compacted soil with a spading fork or sod-coring tool. **Improve the soil.** Top-dress with compost and add an

organic or slow release lawn fertilizer applied in spring or fall. If pH is low, add lime. **Don't over-water.** Just one inch of water per week is enough. **Plant shade-loving ground covers.** Native plants include *Fragaria vesca* (woods strawberry,) *Coptis laciniata* (goldenthread) or *Maianthemum dilatatum* (false lily of the valley).

### **Remove lawn moss with elbow grease**

If the moss isn't too extensive, it can be removed in early spring. **Rake it out.** Use a stiff metal rake, dethatching rake or a mechanical dethatcher available from rental agencies. After this procedure, stimulate grass growth and density with organic fertilizer, a topdressing of compost and locally appropriate grass seed. **Use chemicals as a last resort.** Two kinds of chemicals that will temporarily remove moss in lawns are iron sulfate and potassium soap salts. While both are allowable by national organic standards, they can cause severe skin and eye irritation. The soap salts are highly toxic to aquatic invertebrates. With either chemical, care is necessary to avoid runoff into storm drains or surface water. These chemicals are short-lived fixes, and still require elbow grease -- raking out the dead moss. Unless lawn conditions are improved, the moss will come back.

## ROOF MOSS

Places where the roof gets direct sun are unlikely to grow moss. Problems typically arise on north-facing slopes and in the shade. On most standard residential roofing materials -- either three-tab composition shingles or cedar shingles and shakes -- moss can damage the roof.

### **Prevent roof moss with maintenance or metal roofing**

Leaves and needles hold moisture on the roof's surface and nurture the growth of moss. **Clean twice a year.** Regularly removing debris helps keep the roof dry and moss-free. **Prune branches.** Trim and thin overhanging branches that keep the roof in shade, which causes slow drying after rainfall. **Switch to metal.** Moss can't grow on a smooth surface, so if it's time to replace your roof, consider metal. This is a permanent solution and while it's initially more expensive, metal roofing lasts longer and is a comparable value over the roof's lifetime.

### **Remove roof moss with wet sweeping**

**Sweep with a wet broom.** As long as the growth isn't too well-established, wet sweeping will remove most of the moss and is the most environmentally-friendly choice. Even if you use a chemical to kill the moss, it won't remove the plant material and you'll have to get up there and clean anyway. If your roof slope is steeper than five inches of rise per horizontal foot, hiring a professional is recommended. **Avoid zinc and pesticides.** Three-inch strips of metallic zinc nailed near the top of the roof are effective at reducing moss, but the cumulative effect of the released metal can pollute rivers and streams. Pesticide products most commonly sold for moss control contain zinc sulfate, which is highly water soluble and toxic to aquatic animals.

### **Don't use pressure washing or detergent**

Pressure washing isn't recommended for roofs because the water can get underneath and damage the shingles. In the past, sprinkling detergent to kill the moss was advised. However, roofers now caution against it because the phosphates in detergents were replaced with a degreasing agent that attacks and degrades the asphalt shingles.

## **MOSS ON OTHER SURFACES**

Moss can build up on benches, and pose a safety hazard by making surfaces like decks and walkways slippery.

### **Prevent moss with regular maintenance**

Moss is easiest to remove in the early stages of growth, so the best prevention is regular monitoring and cleaning beginning in the fall.

### **Remove moss by scrubbing or pressure washing**

Scraping and scrubbing removes moss on most surfaces. Pressure washing can make the job easier. While potassium soaps used for lawns can also be used on sidewalks and other structures, runoff can pollute storm drains and surface water.

## **Environmentally-friendly moss management**

What's a conscientious homeowner to do? Live with moss when and where you can. Get some exercise, muscle a little elbow grease and remove it yourself. Use chemicals only as a temporary last resort, recognizing that they can be harmful to waterways. Then take preventative measures so that the moss doesn't come back.

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