



## Ball Moss - *Tillandsia recurvata*

Our VillageWalk trees and shrubs lend themselves to a beautiful and unique small ball shaped plant, usually with long, stiff hair-like projections and little pods on their ends from which seeds are dispersed by the wind. Called *ball moss*, this member of the bromeliad family grows not as one plant, but many little plants clustered together in a colonial association. You'll see grey-green clumps on trees, shrubs and also on power lines, rocks and fences.

Our tropical area especially favors *ball moss* because of high humidity and shady habitat of the lower and interior limbs of shrubs and live oak trees.

Like its relative Spanish moss, and similar to many bromeliads, orchids, ferns, and lichens, *ball moss* grows as an epiphyte (non-parasitic plant living on other plants) and grows flowers and seeds. It survives by absorbing water that collects on its leaves and photosynthesizes its own food from bacteria and other minerals largely from dust in the atmosphere. *Ball moss* has no real root system, rather they have "pseudo-roots" that serve to attach onto the bark, but it derives no nutrients from the tree.

During heavy rains or wind storms, limbs heavily infested with *ball moss* may break off under the added weight. Usually these fallen branches are dead or dying, leading some people to conclude

that the ball moss had killed the limbs. In live oaks, however, interior branches tend to die from lack of sunlight, whether there is any *ball moss* or not. While *ball moss* may compete with its host for sunlight, it's not considered a harmful parasite like mistletoe.

*Ball moss* most likely does not directly harm its host plant and it has benefits to our ecosystem. For one thing, it fixes nitrogen from the atmosphere and as the *ball moss* fall to the ground, it decomposes and adds nutrients to the soil. Ecologically, it is an important habitat for insects and small animals and acts like a mini buffet for feeding birds and other animals.

*Ball moss* does make its host trees unsightly in some people's eyes. However, what makes an oak tree ugly to some, may give the tree character to others. To me, *ball moss*, Spanish moss, lichens and other epiphytes growing on living and dead trees are part of the natural environment and the native tropical beauty of our Florida landscape. I look at *ball moss* as another interesting native plant that has a comfortable niche in our local ecosystem.