

WHAT IS THAT GRAY HAIR- LIKE MATERIAL IN THE TREES?

When the French arrived in what we call America, they asked the same question of the Native Americans, and the natives replied that it was “tree hair,” or “Itla-okla.” The French used their own imaginations and called it Spanish Beard, because it reminded them of the long black beards of the earlier Spanish explorers. Over the years the name took on what some people thought to be a more sophisticated name, Spanish moss.

Spanish moss (*Tillandsia usneoides*) is from the Bromeliaceae family and is actually an air-feeding plant not a moss! In the spring a delicate, inconspicuous yellow-green blossom appears on the plants and lasts for around four days. Spanish moss could grow on non-living objects, such as a fence, but seems to prefer growing on trees and can do so without harming the tree. In our area, the Live Oak is a desirable growing spot for the hair-like material because of the tree’s horizontal branches. In addition, the moss prefers an area that is moist and sunny, which makes northeast Florida an ideal place to grow. Since this air plant doesn’t grow in soil it relies upon the scales (trichomes) on its leaves to catch the water and minerals it needs to survive. The moss reproduces through seeds and the disbursement of seeds is by wind, animals, or birds to other trees.

Spanish moss has many uses by animals as well as people. Many animals use the moss for building their homes. Different birds use the moss to build their nests, as does the Yellow-Throated Warbler. The Seminole Bat usually roosts in clumps of Spanish moss to shield it from the sun. Livestock may eat dried out moss as opposed to hay during winter months to gain a little nourishment.

People have used the moss for different uses over many years. It is said that the Timucua women used the moss to make skirts or apron-like clothing. Currently, as well as in the past, Spanish moss has been used as stuffing for furniture because it is durable. The Great Fire of 1901, which burned most of downtown Jacksonville, was started when a spark ignited piles of Spanish moss that were drying outside a mattress factory (the moss was used for mattress stuffing). The plant is also currently being experimented with as an herbal medicine. Cajun Healers have long used Spanish moss for treating diabetes. The moss contains inuline, which is a substance similar to insulin, and when combined with other agents may help diabetics.

SOURCES:

Website: www.stcharlesparish.com

University of Florida website: www.sirc.un.edu/extension

Website: www.birdsource.org

Texas Parks and Wildlife website: www.nsr.tn.edu

Jerald T. Milanich, *The Timucua*, (Blackwell Publishers, 1999).

