

12/15/2011 Spanish Moss in the Tropical Dome

Spanish Moss: Not Spanish, and Not a Moss!

Spanish moss (*Tillandsia usneoides*) is actually a flowering plant in the bromeliad family, which includes the pineapple. The long, hairlike greenish-gray growths (up to 25 feet long) that hang from tree branches are familiar to anyone who has visited the southeastern United States. The plant can be found throughout the Western Hemisphere wherever the climate is warm and humid. It has been introduced to other areas such as Hawaii and Australia.

Spanish moss is an epiphyte, so it grows on other plants, typically bald cypress, oaks, and many other trees. It does not grow on telephone lines, fences, or other nonliving structures. Although the growths can become heavy over time, they take nothing from the trees and do not harm them. The plant is not a parasite. As a flowering plant, Spanish moss produces its own food from sunlight. It absorbs minerals that leach from tree leaves or from accumulations of organic matter that wash out of the atmosphere or collect on tree branches. The plant has no roots, so water is absorbed directly through the leaves.

The slender leaves are covered with many scales that give it a bluish-gray look. The scales help prevent water loss. Spanish moss produces tiny flowers that are rarely noticed. Eventually small seeds are produced. New plants also can grow from pieces of the plant that are torn off in storms or by birds making nests. The scientific name, *Tillandsia usneoides*, was made up by Linnaeus, the Swedish biologist who gave us our modern system of naming species. Tilland was an earlier Swedish scientist, and “*usneoides*” means “looks like a moss.” Over the years, people have used dried Spanish moss for stuffing and padding. It also is very useful as mulch. Today, it is sold in craft stores or is used by florists to cover the surface of potting material.

Spanish moss is home to many insects, birds, bats, and small mammals in tropical and subtropical environments. See how many clumps of Spanish moss you can find in the Tropical Dome.

Photo credit: U.S. Geological Survey/photo by Tracy Enright

