

Conservation Corner

By Corinne Peterson
Pocahontas County Naturalist



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“There is an ancient conversation going on between mosses and rocks, poetry to be sure.”
Robin Wall Kimmerer

Recently the guys were working at Swan Lake when they discovered a large drift of sheet moss growing in an abandoned well pit, its emerald green color a sharp contrast to the limestone walls. Time to encounter the ancient poem of nature titled “The Mosses.”

Belonging to the Bryophyte Division of the Plant Kingdom, mosses are simple non-vascular plants that first appeared on land 400 million years ago. Today 15,000 species may be found growing around the world. Mosses are divided into three classes commonly called the peat, true, and rock mosses. On the other hand, many things we call mosses aren’t mosses at all. Reindeer moss is a lichen, Irish moss is red algae, and Spanish moss is a flowering plant.

Mosses are the amphibians of the plant world – at home in either semiaquatic environments like moist stream banks, drier habitats like rock surfaces, or even the Arctic tundra. Mosses have no root system. Rather, they collect needed moisture and nutrients from dust and rain or mist in the air. Mosses have exceptional genetic diversity and often live where no other plants can, thanks largely to their ability to tolerate drying out. Moss often appears to hibernate during dry or cold weather only to miraculously return from the dead with a nice, warm rain.

Like amphibians, mosses need water to reproduce. Just as frogs and toads need water in which to lay their eggs and grow their tadpoles, mosses need water for their flagellated sperm to swim to their eggs. The moss life cycle comprises two generations, one during which fertilization occurs and one during which spores are produced.

Mosses, especially sphagnum mosses, have long been used as soil conditioners thanks to their ability to absorb and retain large amounts of water as well as their antiseptic properties. If you have peat ground on your farm, you have prehistoric peat mosses to thank. One of my favorite nature weavings is the thimble sized hummingbird nest of moss and lichens.

Most of us are familiar with moss that grows on the north side of buildings, especially wood siding and shingles. But have you ever thought about growing moss in your garden? Yes, moss adds a soft, green, lush, and touchable element to any shade garden. Here in Iowa three common species work well - sheet moss that also transplants well, cushion moss that forms perfectly round mounds of bright green, and rock cap moss that grows on stones and looks like bright green miniature feathers.

Luckily, moss is easy to grow. Moss spores are everywhere, and if conditions are right they will simply move in. The best time to transplant moss is when humidity levels are high and steady. As soon as the snow melts, I think I’ll find an old log, add some potting soil, and transplant that well pit poetry to a new home in Rosenberger Park.

