

What's Wrong with Moss?

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I frequently get calls asking about taking down or thinning trees. When I ask the caller "Why?" the answer is often because they can't grow grass in the shade, all they have is moss. What's wrong with moss? It's soft, green, drought adapted, and never needs cutting or any other maintenance. All moss requires is that you join it in the shade with your favorite summer beverage and enjoy the spectacle of your neighbors sweating over their grass.

What's wrong with moss? Well it isn't grass. Grass is what is expected. Grass is what the cool people in the neighborhood do. Grass is what your mother warned you about; that and peer pressure. Let's face it the main reason you have or want grass is because everyone else does. But if not grass, then what? That depends on your tastes and what you want your landscape to do for you.

A recent survey found that 85% of people want plants around their houses for beauty. Beauty can also be functional. Your landscape can provide shade to reduce your energy bills; it can attract birds and butterflies for a different kind of beauty; it can be easy to maintain, so you have time to enjoy the beauty.

Deciduous trees on the south and west side of your house will shade the house in summer and keep it cool, but let through winter sun to help warm the house. This can save you 10 percent or more on your cooling and heating bills. Oh, and not only will the trees save on utility bills they will increase your property value by 10 per cent. Several of our native trees are very urban hardy and beautiful. Bald cypress grows well in yards and turns brilliant rust red in the fall. Black gum provides food for birds and has fire engine red fall color. American hornbeam has yellow fall color, doesn't get too big, and has interesting wood.

Native plants attract birds and butterflies and other animals to your yard. Yes you say, but those animals include snakes and rats. Well, if you have snakes you won't have rats and if you have rats you don't have snakes. So, it's snakes OR rats; but you will only have either if they are already nearby. It's not like there are animal newspaper with classified ads for new habitat. Also if you provide good habitat in your yard year round, those creatures attracted to your yard are less likely to try to bunk with you.

Many people are intimidated by native plants; where do I get them? How do I use them? Aren't they messy? Finding native plants in the marketplace can be difficult, but there are resources to help. The Virginia Native Plant Society (www.vnps.org) maintains links to a number of retailers that specialize in native plants. The Audubon Society of Northern Virginia (www.asnv.org) has a wildlife habitat program that comes complete with ambassadors that will come to your house and help you get started on converting to a native plant habitat.

If you are already a gardener, using native plants is no harder than using plants from Asia, Europe or elsewhere. In fact if you have a vegetable garden with tomatoes, beans, squash, and/or peppers you have already used broadly defined native plants – all originated in the Americas. Native plant gardens can be as neat and tidy or as messy as you want. The main issue in using native plants is to get to know them, their needs and what they look like. Fortunately many of our native plants are related to more

commonly used non-natives. For example, Virginia rose (*Rosa virginiana*) and pasture rose (*Rosa carolina*) are similar to tea roses. Two good resources for learning about native plants are Native Plants for Wildlife Habitat and Conservation Landscaping - *Chesapeake Bay Watershed* (<http://www.nps.gov/plants/pubs/chesapeake/>) and The Lady Bird Johnson Wildflower Center (www.wildflower.org).

It's easy to get started on converting your grass to native plants – pick a spot, dig up the grass, find a native plant you like that will grow there, and plant it!