

Sermon on the Moss

By Doug Rice, Cohost: Yard Talk T.V. Show

It has been beautifully said that “the meek shall inherit the earth”. That is certainly true of the meek moss plant in our climate.

If you live in the Pacific Northwest you will likely have moss in your grass. Remember, this is not the Midwest or desert southwest where you can't even *grow* moss. However, many people move here from those regions and are confused by the prevalence of moss in their lawns. They look at their new Northwest lawn and think: “Oh my! There's an invasive species in my lawn!” Many have been convinced by the pesticide and turf industry that moss has invaded like a weed to gobble up their lawn. The truth is, moss is our natural, native ground cover well-adapted to our wet, compacted, and acidic soils. And, in spite of the negative imported mind-set about it, moss actually has many merits.

Less maintenance: Moss has no maintenance requirements. If it is growing in the lawn, it has already met its needs. Moss needs no watering, or mowing, or fertilizer amendments. If you have mixed lawn and moss, raise your mower a little higher to just cut the grass. Besides, longer grass allows the grass to be stronger and to out-compete the moss. Moss is almost always found in lawns that are commonly cut too short.

Happy as an “Ivar’s” clam: Moss does well in our climate and soil. It does better when the soil is soaked and soggy in the winter—deadly for grass. And, moss usually remains green longer, even in the summers or coldest winters when the grass turns golden.

If you have moss, you have the conditions for moss and not grass. Grass requires loose, well drained, un-compacted, non-clay, non-acidic, non-shaded, non-sloped soil. It often requires fertilizer and full sun. Not so, moss. Moss can take sun or shade, all that “bad” soil and loves to be left alone and without maintenance—similar to some other northwest natives...human ones included.

Beauty: For every American turf lord trying to get moss out of the lawn there is a Japanese gardener trying to get grass out of the moss. Almost anyone, when they look at a traditional “Moss Garden” gasps in appreciation of its emerald beauty. Yet, when they see moss in their own lawn they gasp in horror. When asked why they disapprove of moss in the lawn most people seem to think it equates to having dandelions. This perception is entirely cultural and reinforced by large chemical companies.

The 20 foot reality check: Studies have shown that at 20 feet, most people can barely tell if there is moss in the grass or not. At 40 feet you can't tell at all. In many lawns you can't tell if there is moss until you move the grass leaves apart and look deep. So you don't really have to worry about folks driving by and judging the amount of moss in the lawn...it will only be your friends and family who will judge you and if you are wise, you will re-educate all of them about how smart it is to have a mostly moss garden. Again, it's all in the perception!

Win/Win: The truth is, grass and moss seem to like each other. One grows where the other has some difficulty--in a kind of complimentary relationship. If the grass is really happy, moss can barely get a toe-hold because grass can out-compete it, especially if

kept at its healthy height of to 2-3 inches. If the conditions are less ideal for lawn, moss simply fills in. Truly, moss is your friend.

Resistance is futile: To change the conditions that favor moss you have to go to a whole lot of trouble and a lot of expense. First, you have to use one of several moss killers which turns your yard to ugly brown crispy moss until you rake it out. It helps at this point to aerate the lawn with a heavy duty machine over the entire surface. Then you have to add 1/4--1/2" of compost and a new planting of grass seed, plus a liberal dose of garden lime both now and for every year thereafter. It can take a whole day or more of work, and many dollars, and time for the grass to grow. And then you will have to do it every year, because you have not solved the *cause* of the moss—the northwest soil, shade, acid, and water conditions that favor moss and not grass.

The Final Solution: To really get rid of moss permanently, you have to create ideal conditions for grass—or you WILL have moss. First, make sure you have *good* drainage off the site, especially in the wet winter. You may have to excavate and create drain fields. You may also have to dig up and remove your compacted clay soil and replace with loose sandy loam soils—ideal for grass. And this soil would have to be at least six inches to a foot in depth. But even if you did this, you would have to make sure you had full sun and no shade from nearby trees. To alleviate the inadequate light and excessive acidic situation—favored by moss—you would have to remove any conifer trees or other large trees from your yard and possibly your neighbor's yard and then provide annual liming.

Benefits: If you have children or pets, moss can be an advantage in your yard. If you have only grass, you can part the grass with your fingers and see bare dirt below. When children or pets play on the grass, or when they just walk across it, they all get dirty really fast, particularly in wet conditions. If you have plenty of moss, they don't get dirty—although they will still get grass stains! Also, when children fall on a mossy lawn, the moss cushions their fall—particularly for small children.

Embracing your moss can cut down on your yard maintenance as well as the costs of maintenance, resulting in real dollar savings. You won't need to mow as often, you won't need to lime the soil, and you won't need to water. Perhaps the biggest benefit is that moss grows so densely, it crowds out weed seed germination—cutting down your need for weeding!

Just Get Over It: That is our message from the Natural Yard Care side of things. Let moss and grass co-exist and proudly remember that we are just “a little different” up here than in the rest of the country!

For more information on moss management, check out www.growsmartgrowsafe.org and naturalyardcare.info/