

A Greener View: Moss

by Jeff_Rugg

Q: I have found a large area of moss growing on my lawn. I want to get rid of it, but my wife thinks I can transplant it to an area in her flowerbed. What do you think would be a good way to do this, if I decide to do it her way?

A: Moss can be really easy to transplant. I have done it several times, but I have also had it not succeed, as well. The key to success is that the new location needs to have the proper growing conditions. Moss does not need a good soil. In fact, it can grow on boulders if it has enough moisture and shade. If the soil is good enough to grow other plants, it probably will and the moss will not survive.

Let's start with where the moss is now. The location on your lawn has one or probably more of the following conditions that don't allow the grass to grow: too much shade, compacted soil, too much moisture in the soil, too shallow soil, too low soil acidity or a soil with few nutrients.

The new location to where your wife wants to move the moss needs to have similar soil conditions to where it is now. Moss will dry out and die if it gets the amount of sun that flowers need. Grass and flowering plants need deep soil that has plenty of air in it for gas exchange. That means the soil can't be smashed down and compacted, which minimizes air pores. Moss has tiny, shallow roots and doesn't care if the soil is compacted. Don't work hard at preparing the new site in the flowerbed for the moss.

Moss will thrive on rocks being splashed by a waterfall. They love the soggy soil that would drown most other plants. If the new soil has the proper pH balance and plenty of nutrients, seeds from normal plants will spout, grow and suck the moisture out of the soil, killing the moss.

Since moss doesn't have real roots, you can slide a trowel or maybe even your hand under the clumps and lift them off the ground. Soak them in water for an hour. Move them to the new spot and set them in a pleasing arrangement. Keep them moist by watering or misting daily for several weeks. Once moss has become established, it will be able to go dormant when the weather dries out and come back when the rains do, but until then, it needs to stay damp.

If you need more coverage, you can break the existing clumps into smaller pieces, even as small as half an inch wide. The smaller pieces will take several years to grow as big as the existing clumps. Soak them and plant them as above.

It is possible to paint moss onto flowerpots, logs and rocks. Take a large clump of moss and add two cups of buttermilk or a cup of powdered milk with two cups water. Chop it up in your blender at the lowest speed until you have a thick milkshake consistency. Add more moss or water to change the consistency. Use the mix to paint the objects on which you want the moss to grow. Keep the objects damp by misting them until the moss grows.

For a faster result, the moss clumps can be attached to forms and objects. Often, it is helpful to spread a thin layer of mud on the object first so that the wet moss clump has something to stick to. Moss can be installed on rocks in water gardens, especially if one of the moss edges can reach down into the water, where it will soak up liquid for the whole clump.

With proper installation techniques, moss can even be installed on a shady roof or vertical wall. It protects the roofing material from sunlight and it keeps the roof cooler in summer and warmer in winter.

I don't believe in pulling clumps of moss from wooded locations or natural areas, anymore than I would dig up flowers from those locations. Some local nurseries stock moss, but not very many. A few types are available online. Check www.mossacres.com for some hardy varieties and for some starter kits.

As for your lawn, you might want to consider leaving the moss alone. If moss is growing, then grass has one of the problems listed above preventing it from growing. Removing or killing the moss will not help the grass. Moss does not stop grass from growing, but a healthy grass will stop moss from growing. Fixing the soil and environmental problems will help the grass much more than killing the moss.

If there is too much shade for the grass and it is caused by trees you can't prune or buildings, then it may be impossible to fix. In this case, moss is a great alternative to grass. It is green, and it is pretty when it covers an area all by itself. An area of moss will not even need to be mowed.

If the soil is too compacted for the grass, then core aeration might help fix that problem. Adding limestone can raise the pH to fix an acidity problem. Replacing or adding topsoil might help fix the remaining problems that prevent grass from growing.

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