

BOTANY  
**NATURE  
 RAMBLINGS**  
 by Frank Thome



Useful Plants

► **MOSESSES**, as a group, have almost no practical uses. This not very encouraging statement, in the introduction to a new book, *How to Know the Mosses*, might seem almost an invitation not to buy or read it. And that would be a pity indeed, for mosses have greater immediate interest, and greater ultimate useful-

ness, too, than such a deprecatory declaration admits on its face.

Mosses do have at least a few practical uses, the author, Dr. H. S. Conard, emeritus professor of botany at Grinnell College, concedes. Sphagnum is widely used as a moist packing material for live plants and small nursery stock in shipment, and on an even larger scale as a conditioner of heavy, humus-lacking soils. It is also used to some extent as an absorbent material in special-type surgical dressings. Some of the giant West Coast mosses serve as replacements for excelsior or shredded paper in packing crockery.

But the higher usefulness of mosses is what they accomplish just by being alive and having their places in the complex of the earth's vegetation. They aid materially in making this planet a fit place for men and beasts and bigger plants to live on. They and their kin-plants, the liverworts, colonize bare rock after it has been pioneered by the tougher and even lowlier plants, the lichens. They cover gashed scars in soil left by landslips, by erosion, by forest fires, and hold it until larger plants are ready to take over.

They mantle the trunks of fallen trees in wet woods, and at least indirectly aid in their return to humus for the enrichment of the soil.

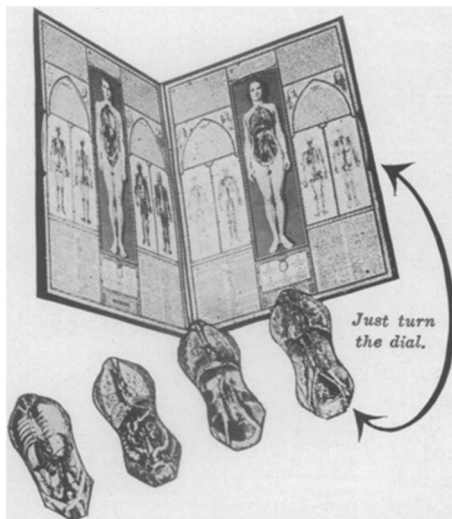
Not the least of the usefulness of mosses is the stimulus they give to the intellectual curiosity of human beings, and the esthetic satisfaction they yield upon more intimate acquaintance. If you can get yourself past the point where "all mosses look alike", you will find an infinite variety in form, and many most interesting mechanical adaptations to meet the problems of living.

Bringing out these points, and also giving some ideas of the beauties to be found in mosses, has been the task of the book's illustrator, Miss Louisa Sargent. Her 363 small, accurately made pen drawings are enough in themselves to convince the curious nibbler at the pages of what fascinating vistas in miniature he will open up if he will equip himself with a reasonably good hand lens and start peering at the stiff little evergreen leaves and the gnome-like, flowerless fruiting growths that he has until now never troubled to look at.

*Science News Letter, September 22, 1945*

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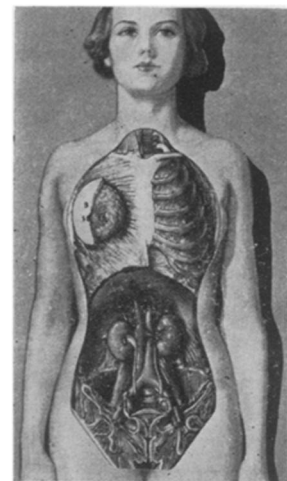
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