

Inexpensive Summer Fun

Mosses Are Easy To Keep But Not So Easy To Study

(Fifth of a series of 12 articles. Next week—Collecting Fungi)



MOSSES are easy to collect, easy to keep. To that extent they make very satisfactory hobby material. But they escape being a "snap" through at least medium difficulty in studying, because most of them are small, therefore requiring close examination with your hand-lens.

While mosses may be laid between the sheets of a regular plant press, usually this is not done. It is easier, and in the end just as satisfactory, to put them in small boxes or even in envelopes and let them dry that way. When you want to examine them at home or in camp, just take a bit off your specimen and soak it in water for a minute or two; it will then be fresh as new.

Take a good, generous pinch of any moss sod that interests you. Better take a little of whatever it is growing on, too. (This advice obviously doesn't hold, if the moss is growing on solid rock; but if it is on earth or tree bark, collection of the "substratum" is an easy matter.)

Moist, shady woodlands are the best collecting grounds for mosses, but some kinds can be found even in deserts, while in bogs the greater part of the soggy ground will be carpeted deeply with moss—usually sphagnum. Sphag-

num moss keeps growing at its tips, while the dead lower ends of the stems pile into deep peat beds (the "turf" of Irish fireplaces). Ancient peat beds become lignite or brown-coal deposits.

When you are collecting your moss specimens, be sure to get them with the fruiting-bodies or capsules if you can. These capsules, which are the nearest things to flowers and seed-pods that the moss plant has, are botanists' principal means for identifying them. And even if you don't consult the books on the subject to find out exactly what are the names of your specimens, the capsules are very interesting little things to look at with your lens.

Not everything that is called a moss is really a member of the moss division of the plant kingdom. Almost any plant with closely crowded, tiny leaves, or with finely divided, hair-like branches is very likely to be called a moss, so that these "imitation" mosses range through all groups of plants.

The trailing "Spanish moss" of the South, that hangs on trees and telephone wires, is one of the higher plants—surprisingly enough, a member of the pine-apple family. Up in the North Woods, the "beard moss" on the trees is really a

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For stations cooperating with Science Service in reporting earthquakes recorded on their seismographs see SNL May 21.

lichen, member of a plant group lower than the mosses. "Reindeer moss" that grows in many forests, even in the South, is another lichen.

Most likely to fool you, however, are some of the moss-like members of the fern family, especially the ones called ground-pine and club-moss. They grow along with real mosses, look like them, but aren't mosses. Avoiding these botanical pitfalls is mainly a matter of living along with your mosses for a while and becoming acquainted with them.

For more information about collecting mushrooms and toadstools and a list of books and pamphlets on the subject, send us a postcard with your name and address. Ask for Bulletin 5. Address: Science News Letter, 2101 Constitution Ave., Washington, D. C.

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