



Christina Mild  
**RIO DELTA WILD**

FLORA FACTS

Scientific Name:  
*Tillandsia recurvata*

Common Names:  
Small Ball Moss

Family: Bromeliaceae  
(Bromeliad)

**Some Birds Nest Near  
Ball Moss**

It isn't difficult to  
find Small Ball Moss,  
*Tillandsia recurvata*.  
Native plant  
nurseryman Mike  
Heep recommends

looking for the plant in ebony woods. In some parts of the country, it even grows on tombstones and utility wires.

Beautiful images taken by John Ingram are posted on his website: <http://windowsonnature.com>. Mr. Ingram has photographed a Northern Parula, feeding young in a nest camouflaged by *Tillandsia recurvata*. That's pretty special, a beautiful home for a colorful family of young birds.

The Epizine Herbicide Company, with a detailed website, would have us believe that *Tillandsia recurvata* is a threat to landscapes across the U.S.A. They, of course, sell chemicals aimed at "The Control of Epiphytic Weeds."

It is likely that the plant has become a pest in some places. I've found Small Ball Moss growing on trees which were obviously dying. I've also found it on beautiful and healthy trees, looking no much the worse year after year.

According to those who consider *Tillandsia recurvata* a pest, it is a nutritional pirate, absorbing rain-borne nutrients before they reach the ground, and girdling tree limbs.

Other experts value the special role this epiphyte plays in our ecosystem. It has an uncanny ability to survive, suspended in mid-air, in harshly-arid climates.

Many references state that *Tillandsia recurvata* causes no harm to the larger plant on which it grows. The scales which cover the plant's surface allow it to catch moisture efficiently. Ball moss is a nitrogen fixer. It is able to convert atmospheric nitrogen (unusable to most plants) into a form that plant cells can use. (Legumes, with the help of bacteria, are also capable of this.)

Thus, this small plant is able to survive without growing roots into the soil and without robbing nutrients from the larger plant on which it sits. This pretty much describes the nature of an epiphyte.

*Tillandsia recurvata* has a preference for growing on live oaks in some places. In the LRGV, you'll find it growing on just about any hardwood species, typically positioned in partial shade of the tree's canopy.

A pretty specimen grows within an ebony tree at C. B. Woods. Looking deeper into that tree's branches, one finds a nesting dove. Had I not been searching for Ball Moss to photograph, I would have overlooked the dove's nest. It was elegantly camouflaged by similarity of shape and position.

As far as I know, birds have not stated why they enjoy nesting in or near *Tillandsia recurvata*. Studies of insects which frequent the plant show that most utilize it for shelter, rather than as food. Perhaps this accounts for the Northern Parula's nesting preference, as insects are a favored dietary item. How fortunate, to have insects show up mid-day as ravenous young demand to be fed! It seems especially fortuitous to attract insect visitors which have no interest in consuming either yourself or your nest.

*Tillandsia recurvata* is one of three epiphytes occurring in the LRGV. Spanish Moss and the larger and more rare Bailey's Ball Moss are others.

Dr. Tim Brush, UTPA ornithology professor, finds the Tropical Parula associated mainly with *Tillandsia usneoides*, Spanish Moss, at least in the valley. He thinks the nesting preference for *Tillandsias* is a function of safety from predators, since the nest is hard to find.

Florida has many more species of *Tillandsia* and related Bromeliads, and a website originating from that state aims to protect them. Importation of vibrantly colorful Bromeliads has become common. Along with those imported bromeliads, an invasive, exotic pest weevil has arrived. The weevil is destroying populations of five Florida-native species at an alarming rate. An additional six species are also vulnerable.

Thus, one finds on the web "Save Florida's Native Bromeliads," in seeming contradiction to "Control the Epiphytic Weeds."

To that I add: Provide new homes for the Northern Parula! Preserve a *Tillandsia recurvata* today!

How does one go about planting this unusual life form? In nature, small seeds are blown by the wind. They develop root-like attachments to stick fast onto the bark of a tree.

Rescued plants, found on fallen limbs, can be reattached to living trees. In addition, smaller pieces of an entire plant can be carefully separated and fastened onto trees, preferably in moist and shady locations. A mister can be used to provide water. Rainwater or demineralized water is preferred.

*Tillandsia recurvata* is one of the many special plants growing in the LRGV. It has a special role here, just as you and I do. Our understanding of that role has barely just begun.

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