

# Spanish Moss - The South's Mystical Elixir!



**KAL'S  
KALEIDOSCOPE**

Faster than a speeding bullet! More powerful than a locomotive! Able to leap tall buildings in a single bound? Is it SUPERMAN? No! It's the upcoming Holiday Season, which will arrive faster than a speeding bullet and roar in more powerful than a locomotive. Will it be able to leap tall buildings in a single bound?



Probably not. But still, the Holiday Season with all its hustle and bustle is one of the busiest times of the year. There's lots to get done!

Halloween pumpkins must be carved to showcase their best features. Trick-or-Treat candy must be stored up for the big night. And don't forget Junior's Halloween costume...something not too gory, I hope. As Halloween gives way to Thanksgiving, a turkey will be on everyone's holiday to-do list. A big plump one is always pleasing, oozing with spicy juices, and complemented by a side dish of oyster dressing. Once the memory of the tasty turkey fades, Christmas will roar in like a locomotive. And to keep the Christmas train on track, it's best to make sure Christmas presents are purchased early.

But wait! What on earth to buy Uncle Mortimer this year? A nose clipper for his hairy nostrils? What would tickle Aunt Pokey pink? Some pink, sponge-end rollers? The

answer? A Spanish moss blanket. A what you say? A blanket made out of that stringy, gray stuff that hangs from trees throughout the South? Kal! You gotta be kidding! How icky is that! Patience my friends. Perhaps after a brief history lesson and a personal testimony your ickiness will dissipate.

Spanish moss! The very words epitomize the Deep South more than any other native plant. When Hollywood portrays the South, it festoons the set's fake trees with the wispy gray plant. Southern artists splash it liberally onto their canvases. Writers like Faulkner and Tennessee Williams evoke it in their writing. Gordon Lightfoot even wrote a song about it! But the name, Spanish moss, is a misnomer.

Spanish moss is neither Spanish, nor is it a moss. It is an epiphyte, or air plant, and is more closely related to bromeliads and orchids, and even odder - pineapples. It is the only species of the pineapple family indigenous to the con-

tinental United States. Its favorite abode is the live oak, where it attaches itself to the oak's branches, draping them with long tendrils of gray "hair," giving them a Southern-Gothic appearance.

Contrary to popular belief, Spanish moss is not parasitic. It absorbs the necessary moisture needed to sustain it directly from the air through scales in its long gray "hairs." Spanish moss does no harm to trees, nor does it compete for food. It gets nothing from trees other than a nice, sturdy place to call home. Its survival depends on a lush cocktail of sunlight, moisture, and clean air. Unfortunately, increased pollution and urban sprawl have taken their toil on the once thriving plant.

In times past, Spanish moss was much more than just Southern-Gothic

stylish as camouflage - redneck *haute couture*, as it were.

Spanish moss not only protects people from pests, in the 19th and early 20th Centuries it helped keep folks out of the poor house. Moss harvesters gleaned a profitable business from the South's once vast swamps and forests. Using long poles to pull the moss clumps from trees, they baled the moss into great heaps, transporting them by boat or wagon to processing gins. There, the gins turned the moss's gray strands into black fibers similar to horsehair, which became a staple of the upholstering industry. Some of our grandest old homes still have furniture upholstered in this ubiquitous symbol of the South.

But that was then, and this is now. Readily available, cheap synthetic fibers

Dawn was 24 years old when it happened. She was happily married then, and was mother to a rambunctious son whom she loved chasing around the house, then out the front door, and into the woods. In those days she had no trouble keeping up with him...life was good. When she and her husband's military careers ended, they decided to move to Floral City, Florida, to be near relatives. Their new lives in Florida proved a success...life was still good.

But all that changed on November 19, 1980.

As her husband drove out of their driveway onto a busy highway, Dawn looked out her window, and to her horror saw a car careening toward them; it had seemingly come from nowhere. It was later she learned the car was clocked at 70 mph. As Dawn says, "Just before the impact, I had just enough time to yell a word that's not printable." In an instant, she was blasted through the windshield and landed on the ground, just as their car tumbled over her. Her husband, cut, bruised, and dazed, walked away from the accident. Dawn would never walk again - her spine crushed. Life...was no longer good.

In the weeks and months following the accident, depression seeped into Dawn's life. "Terrible depression. Awful suicidal thoughts. But of course I never acted on them, but they were there. It was bad..." She and her family tried to adjust. There was the therapy, learning to get around in a wheelchair, and re-learning how to do the simple, everyday things that she once took for granted. After four years, her husband filed for a divorce; her husband who had been her arms and legs...her everything.

Now, on top of the depression, Dawn had to contend with the other emotions that surged into her life. "Rage! Grief! Self pity! How could this have happened to me, and why?" But from somewhere deep inside herself, Dawn pulled forth her last drop of courage. "I went to rehab. Learned how to crawl in and out of a specially built van all by myself. Learned how to drive using only my hands. Learned how to lift myself onto the john, and then get back into my wheelchair...it was hell."



eye candy. The old-timers found a myriad of uses for it. Fishermen, hunters, and trappers who made a living from the South's bayous and swamps often wrapped themselves in Spanish moss to buffet themselves from that most-pesky of all pesky pests - the vicious mosquito. For the same reason, today's sportsmen drape themselves with Spanish moss while sitting in their palatial deer stands and comfy duck blinds. It's also very

have made moss harvesting a thing of the past. Who in their right mind would brave mosquito-infested swamps to do the back-braking labor of gathering Spanish moss, and then process it into something of value? Only a nut! Right? Or, perhaps, someone who discovered that Spanish moss was a ladder leading upward out of the dark, dank hole of depression. Dawn Klug, take your place center stage. And take a bow!

But out of the hell that her life had become, Dawn discovered a new hobby - weaving. "I bought a loom, and had it customized so I didn't have to use my feet to press the loom's pedals. And then, like a bolt out of the blue, it happened! After a sleepless night, I got up to read, and there was this article about the lost art of Spanish moss weaving. Weaving Spanish moss...into what I wondered?"

Dawn's sleepless night and that magazine article changed her life. She read everything she could get her hands on pertaining to Spanish moss weaving. As she read she learned, as she learned, she put what she had learned into practice. And as we all know, practice makes perfect. After months of trial and error, at last she was weaving, and the Spanish moss was weaving itself into her very soul. "I'd never had good self-esteem," she said. "And the weaving made me feel good about myself. Not only was I saving a dying art, I now had a new purpose in life. Me and my son would survive, all thanks to Spanish moss!"

When asked how Spanish moss became associated with Spaniards, Dawn laughs. "Oh! There are several legends floating around. One includes a young Spanish bride and her near-death experience with the Cherokees who were none to happy that white folks were invading their land in the early days of the Spanish Conquistadors. In reprisal for her and her husband's intrusion, the warriors cut off her hair, and threw it into the branches of an old oak...within a week the black hair was gray."

"Another legend concerns a lusty conquistador, who, after being rebuffed by a beautiful Indian maiden, chased her up an oak tree, where she jumped into another tree and escaped. The lusty Spaniard was not so lucky. His long grey beard became hopelessly entangled in the trees branches, and there he died. Mother Nature took her course, and eventually nothing remained of the lusty ol' boy but his beard. By super-



natural force, the beard grew from tree to tree as a reminder of the conquistador's unrequited love. Soon, almost all the old oaks in the South sported a "Spanish Beard." Dawn laughs again, "Men...gotta love 'em!"

And speaking of men, it's usually men who Dawn sells her weaving to. Although she weaves wool and cotton tapestries, the demand for Spanish moss weavings is limited to collectors and



Civil War re-enactors who are mostly men. Her moss saddle blankets fetch \$600. It takes a year to do three...at last count she had 17 on order.

Thankfully, she doesn't have to go looking for Spanish moss herself; friends and neighbors keep her stocked by dropping off truck loads of the wiry, Brillo-like moss. She painstakingly removes debris from the Spanish moss, after which, she works the tendrils into something resembling thread. On a small spinning wheel she feeds the thread, and within a few minutes she has a few feet of something resembling yarn. It takes about a week to position hundreds of strands of yarn onto her loom, where she sits in her wheelchair in her humble mobile home, weaving the simple strands of Spanish moss into something useful and beautiful. And when she does, Dawn's life is once again...good! (For a video of

Dawn weaving, please check out this website: [www.tampabay.com/components/video/lost-art-of-weaving-spanish-moss/8305854001/2652468001](http://www.tampabay.com/components/video/lost-art-of-weaving-spanish-moss/8305854001/2652468001))

So come the Holiday Season, as you ride by an ancient oak resplendent with a swaying, grey crown of Spanish moss, perhaps you'll remember its history, and think of it's long association with the South that we all love and adore. But most of all, I hope you'll think of Dawn. And amidst the hustle and bustle, perhaps you'll hear the soft, melodic sound of her weaving another masterpiece; another masterpiece comprised of a plant with an identity crisis, but a plant that to her was a mystical elixir curing her of despair.

Here's wishing each of you a very Merry Christmas and Happy Holidays!

*Please remember to keep our troops in your prayers. May God bless, and keep a song in your heart!*

*Kal*



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