

# Peatmoss . . . Treasure From the Bogs!

**STABY**

**“FOR PEAT’S SAKE . . . GIVE PEAT A BREAK!”**

By George ‘Doc’ Abraham, Garden Center Correspondent

Recently there’s been a flurry of articles in trade journals and lay press warning of the danger of peatmoss. The alarming peat warning comes up every few years, then dies down. Garden center operators get many questions, as we do, asking us to spell out just how serious the peat “disease” really is. After talking with bedding plant growers and area doctors, we’ll try to answer questions that are bothering people who use peatmoss.

## Thank The Lord For It!

First, we think the good Lord must have favored bedding plant growers and gardeners because he gave the world so much useful sphagnum peat moss. Without it, the bedding plant industry wouldn’t be the multi-billion dollar business it is today; America wouldn’t be as beautiful as it is, and gardeners would have a hard time finding a potting component as good as peatmoss.

### Q) How serious is the fungal disease that’s attributed to peatmoss?

A) First, let’s explain what the disease is. It’s a fungal disease called sporotrichosis, caused by a fungus *Sporothrix schenckii*. It starts as a skin irritation and sometimes inhalation can cause lung infection.

### Q) Was there really an epidemic of sporotrichosis last year?

A) Dr. Thomas D. Landis, Western Nursery Specialist for the U.S.D.A. in Portland, OR, tells us there were 17 cases in Illinois, 30 cases in New York, and the same number in Pennsylvania. 37 people were involved with planting tree seedlings on Arbor Day; of these 10 became infected.

### Q) How did these people happen to get the disease? Not the nursery workers?

A) These people handled the sharp evergreens which were packed with sphagnum moss to keep roots from drying out. The evergreen needles punctured the skin and spores from the stringy moss gained entrance and caused infection.

### Q) Then the disease comes from handling the stringy, moist,

**undecomposed sphagnum moss, and not the brown decayed type used by bedding plant growers and gardeners?**

A) That’s correct. The real villain is the sphagnum moss used to keep the roots moist. You don’t get the disease from the brown, pulverized material correctly called sphagnum peatmoss. A strange fact is that epidemiologists found out that the workers who

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harvest the moss in peat bogs do not contract the disease because there’s nothing there to prick their skin. Another interesting fact is that no one ever got sporotrichosis from growing plants in containers, where they handle peatmoss-based growing media all the time.

### Q) Should people who get evergreen seedlings wrapped in the stringy moss take precautions?

A) It wouldn’t do any harm to wear gloves when handling or planting seedlings that have been packed with sphagnum.

### Q) The terms used are confusing. Can you explain the difference between the peats?

A) They are confusing. In a nutshell, there are 50 kinds of mosses in the “peat family.” Sphagnum moss is that soft gray, stringy moist plant harvested before it has decomposed to form peatmoss used as a soil component by growers and gardeners. We used to use bales of the “stringy” stuff to make a base for floral sprays in our retail business. Called “floral sphagnum,” it’s the villain that causes the fungal disease called Sporotrichosis.

Sphagnum peatmoss is that brown, dried material which makes up the bulk of “peatlite” or artificial soil mixes. It’s so dry that spores have a

hard time surviving in it. For short, it’s simply called just plain peatmoss, which confuses things more, because plain peatmoss has developed into a catchall term for all kinds of peat.

To be exact, sphagnum peatmoss contains only decomposed, brown sphagnum. It’s not the troublemaker that causes the fungal disease.

### Q) Then we shouldn’t be afraid to handle baled sphagnum peatmoss?

A) That’s right. Not everyone should be fearful of handling it because it’s so dry there’s little possibility of contracting the disease. It’s an extremely rare problem, so rare that 9 out of 10 doctors never heard of it.

### Q) Are evergreen seedlings the only dangerous items that can cause the disease?

A) No, roses and other plants that are sharp can cause infection. Anyone working with these or any plant packed in the sphagnum moss should wear gloves and long sleeves. Be alert for blisters, nodules, or skin lesions that fail to heal after three or four weeks.

### Q) Is there a treatment?

A) People who write about it say that oral potassium iodide helps. Some say antibiotics are helpful; some say no. Be sure to tell your doctor that you’ve been exposed to mossy materials that may contain the fungus.

For workers who use the soft, stringy, undecomposed sphagnum moss, Dr. Ed Barnard of the Florida Division of Plant Industry passes along protective measures:

- 1) Wear protective clothes, especially heavy gloves and long-sleeved shirts.
- 2) Skin wounds should be washed out with a disinfectant such as iodine tincture.
- 3) After exposure to sphagnum moss, wash exposed areas with soap and water.
- 4) Report any suspicious skin infections as soon as detected.

Without sphagnum peatmoss, the bedding plant growers couldn’t do the efficient job they’re now doing. The material is not perfect, but it is the best thing on earth to do the job. □

Abraham 89