

DON'T CONFUSE SPHAGNUM MOSS WITH PEAT MOSS

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You may have read about a fungal disease called *Cutaneous Sporotrichosis*, a chronic infection identified by skin lesions. The fungus which causes this disease has been found in several kinds of organic material and, because in extremely rare cases this disease can cause death, gardeners are rightfully concerned about protecting themselves from contracting it. Unfortunately, however, some of the information circulating about how gardeners can contract this disease has been inaccurate. It confuses two separate products; one of which is known to carry the fungus and one of which does not.

One of the materials known to carry the sporotrichosis fungus is **sphagnum moss**. Most frequently used by the floral industry to line wire baskets, this product frequently is being confused with sphagnum peat moss, a soil conditioner known for its ability to bind sandy soils, loosen clay soils and retain water. The difference is an important one. While there have been cases of sporotrichosis resulting from handling sphagnum moss, I'm aware of no cases as a result of handling sphagnum peat moss. Sphagnum moss and sphagnum peat moss are *not* the same product, as many avid gardeners know.

Sphagnum moss is the living moss that grows on top of a sphagnum bog. The fungus *sporotrichum schenckii* is known to live in this growing moss.

Sphagnum peat moss is the dead material that accumulates as new live material grows on top and exerts pressure on the peat moss below. The fungus is not known to live in the levels of a sphagnum bog where peat forms. Harvesters of horticultural peat moss remove the top few inches of the live sphagnum moss and only harvest the peat from the lower layer.

"Living" sphagnum moss is used in the floral industry to make wreaths and to line hanging baskets. Workers in that industry have been warned to protect themselves with gloves and heavy clothing to avoid puncture wounds or scrapes. Gardeners wishing to use sphagnum moss to create their own baskets or for other uses should simply follow the same advice: Wear gloves and long sleeves to prevent coming into contact with the dried moss. No similar warning appears on Material Safety Data Sheets (MSDS) for handling sphagnum peat moss.

Gardeners worldwide use sphagnum peat moss as a soil amendment because its unique cell structure enables peat to:

- Aerate plant roots by loosening heavy clay soils;
- Add body to sandy soil; and
- Save water by absorbing and holding moisture.

Peat moss is not only effective, it's organic and safe to use.

(EDITORIAL NOTE: To clarify terms for our readers, sphagnum moss is so-called long fiber sphagnum sold dried in bales, or living sphagnum collected in the field. Sphagnum peat moss is the brown Canadian peat which is partially decomposed sphagnum found in deeper layers of sphagnum bogs. So far, peat has not been incriminated in cases of sporotrichosis.)