

# The weirdos on terra firma

Some of the strangest space creatures in the Known Universe grow right here on our own planet, including in Mississippi.

Several years ago, I learned that the first plant to be successfully grown from seed to flower in space was one of my garden favorites, a tidy bush zinnia called Profusion Orange.

Heat-and-drought-tolerant, non-stop flowers, covered with butterflies... and able to do the zero-gravity thing as well.

But I'm more fascinated with the weirdos right here on terra firma.

Not talking about bizarre fungi, which blow me away with their "fruiting bodies" descriptively called mushrooms, toadstools, puffballs, stinkhorns and shelves. Those "saprophytes" feed on decaying organic matter like found in rich soils or rotting wood.

And the huge variety of unusual but mostly green mosses carpeting hard-packed acidic soils in shaded

gardens or moist sites are trending as actual lawn substitutes in heavy shade, in need of only occasional weeding and leaf blowing,

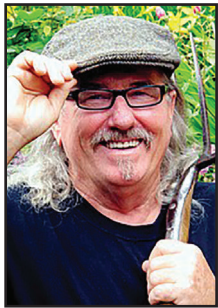
and maybe a little garden sculpture, rock, or old log to give the eye something to focus on.

I can wax poetic about lichens found on old plants, boulders, iron or concrete bridge rails, and even tombstones. They are a combination fungus and algae which help one another grow into fantastic flat, frilly, or scaly shapes.

The most common are gray-green, but I've photographed yellows, reds, and oranges as well.

Most people who ask about them are seeking a control because it looks like they are killing plants. Often starting as flat patches, they can expand and completely encrust limbs and branches, and really do look like diseases.

But they don't harm plants - they are symptoms, not causes (remember, they grow on rocks, too). Active-



FELDER RUSHING



Pitcher plants and sundews get nutrients from trapped insects.

ly growing plants shed larger patches, but old, weak, or otherwise slow-growing plants get covered quickly.

If you find lots of lichens on a plant, prune or fertilize to invigorate the plant, and learn to love the lichens. By the way, reindeer eat them; never know when Santa's

team will need a quick snack.

A couple of other groups of plants with the similar habit of living on, not in, other plants, are orchids and bromeliads. These "epiphytes" get their moisture and nutrients from rainfall and dissolved dust and plant debris. Our native Spanish moss is one of the latter; and the old pass-along night blooming cereus cactus is

helping all of our schools overcome any barriers that might stand in the way of offering computer science in classrooms," Meena said, adding that C Spire is offering to help identify solutions for more teacher training and distance learning. Today, only 47 percent of the state's high schools teach computer science.

C Spire has been heavily involved in efforts to promote computer science education in Mississippi, investing over \$3 million since 2015 in coding challenges, coding academies, pilot accelerated degree programs and other efforts designed to inspire and encourage students to consider pursuing academic degrees or professional careers in science, technology, engineering and math-related fields.

The grassroots computer science education campaign is part of the C Spire Tech Movement designed to move communities forward with a focus on broadband access, workforce development and technology innovation. To learn more about the need for computer science education in K-12 classrooms or to get involved in the "Mississippi's Future Can't Wait" campaign, text FUTURE to 50457 or go to [www.ourMSfuture.com](http://www.ourMSfuture.com).

an epiphyte native to tropical trees and cliffs, which is why it is so tolerant of neglect in small pots indoors.

But the spookiest plants are "parasites" that actually grow roots into and feed off other plants. Mistletoe is one and is very hard to control without killing the limbs, too, because its roots wrap around underneath the bark. Best thing to do is ignore them; I have seen very old mistletoe balls three feet in diameter on ancient oaks in England, without doing serious harm to the trees.

There are many other unconventional plants, from those that sprout little plantlets on the ends of their leaves to wetland-native pitcher plants that get nutrients from dissolved insects trapped in their tubes. Just weird.

To me the most peculiar plant of all is dodder vine, which looks all the world like orange vermicelli draped over shrubs, roadside shrubs and perennial wildflowers and sometimes even annuals in flowerbeds. It twines around and

inserts root-like structures into stems; the only good control, other than repeated pulling, is to remove the infested plants.

Or just enjoy them as space oddities found on this spinning planet. No science fiction writer could come up with creatures so weird.

I've posted photos of all these on my [felderrushing.blogspot.com](http://felderrushing.blogspot.com).

*Felder Rushing is a Mississippi author, columnist and host of the "Gestalt Gardener" on MPB Think Radio. Email gardening questions to [rushingfelder@yahoo.com](mailto:rushingfelder@yahoo.com).*



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## Computer science education bill wins approval in Mississippi House of Representatives

*C Spire grassroots campaign to get computer science in all K-12 public and charter schools makes key advance*

### Press Release

A bill championed by C Spire that would give elementary, middle and high school students in Mississippi access to computer science curriculum in the classroom won overwhelming approval Wednesday, march 12, from the Mississippi House of Representatives.

HB 1165 by Rep. Richard Bennett, R-Long Beach, to bring computer science education to the state's 884 public and charter K-12 schools by the 2023-2024 school year, was approved 114-2 by the 122-member House a day before the deadline for floor action on the legislation during the 2020 session.

Earlier this month, a companion bill, SB 2284 by State Senator Scott DeLano, R-Biloxi, did not receive a hearing or vote in the Senate Education Committee by the March 3 deadline. With the House's action as a guide, supporters are now hopeful the Senate will reconsider its position and back efforts calling for computer science education in all public K-12 schools.

"We appreciate the leadership of House Speaker

Philip Gunn, House Education Committee Chairman Richard Bennett and the House for taking action on such an important issue," said C Spire President and CEO Hu Meena. "Because of their action, the lives of hundreds of thousands of Mississippi school-age children have the potential to be improved with computer science."

The next stop for the bill will be the Mississippi State Senate, which has until the end of the month (March 31) for committee consideration and approval of a companion measure. If that occurs, the 52 Senate members will have until April 8 to decide the legislation's fate by bringing a proposal to the Senate floor for a final vote.

Meena said Mississippi Gov. Tate Reeves, business leaders, teachers, school superintendents and thousands of voters have responded to the company's comprehensive grassroots online, social media, TV, radio and letter writing campaign begun last month to encourage state lawmakers to promote a stronger computer science foundation in the state.

The letters, which reached

all 174 state lawmakers, cited countless examples of how computer science will enhance education and job opportunities for students so they can pursue their hopes and dreams for success in life. "People really understand and embrace the importance of this moment for our state's future," Meena said.

"Getting computer science in all Mississippi classrooms represents a tremendous opportunity to give our young people exposure to the fundamentals necessary for their success in the new 21st century digital economy," Meena said, noting that computer science teaches critical thinking, computational and problem solving skills that benefit all students.

C Spire has worked closely with lawmakers to refine the legislation that would help make computer science available in all schools fully by the 2023-2024 academic year. Many districts and schools have made progress and will not need to make changes while others will need to boost teacher training and update courses to the latest curriculum.

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