

## Microforest

Forests cover big area of land, and have lots of big trees, right?

No, not always.

Of course, many forests are like that. But you might be surprised to know that there are forests with vegetation that can be as tiny as a fingernail, or smaller – forests that flourish at ground-level, in the shade of tall trees – forests that provide shelter and habitat for their own collection of animals.

These are the microforests – complete but tiny ecosystems that play an important role in breaking down and decomposing plant and animal material on the forest floor. As they do, nutrients are recycled into the soil, where they can be used again by growing plants.

### Bryophytes, Fungi & Lichens

The ‘trees’ in a microforest are bryophytes, fungi and lichens (a lichen is a combination of a fungus and an alga, a simple plant.) The group of plants called bryophytes include mosses, liverworts and hornworts. These plants absorb water and nutrients directly through their surfaces, not through a system of vessels, the way flowering plants do.

Have you seen how moss loses moisture when the air is dry? The plant might even look dead – but after a shower of rain, the moss soaks up the water and is green and healthy again.



Photos: Royal Botanic Gardens Melbourne



## Where do Microforests Grow?

Microforests occur in a range of forest types, from dry woodlands to rainforests. The thick carpet of mossy vegetation in the cool shade of a rainforest is only one example of a microforest – fungi, lichens and mosses also grow in arid environments, where they may form a crust on the soil, protecting it from erosion by wind and water.

Wherever microforests grow, they provide food, shelter and habitat for invertebrates – the wide variety of tiny creatures that break down the forest litter and return nutrients to the soil.

Microforests can grow in some unusual places – think of mosses in your lawn, lichens on a boulder or fungi growing in a corner of the compost heap – each one is a tiny microforest, with its own web of life.

### Fascinating Forest Facts

Some lichens have more than one algal partner.

There are currently 304 recorded species of lichens found in Tasmania's eucalypt forests.