

Old Man's Beard Lichen by Rebecca Lexa

Much of the greenery from summer has died back by now, but there are still little patches of color to be found. One of the easiest to find is old man's beard. This common group of lichens is found worldwide, and it grows in abundance around the Refuge. Look for pale green strands hanging down like hair from the branches and trunks of trees, and you'll see how this lichen got its name.

Like other lichens, it is a combination of a fungus and an algae. The fungus provides the structure of the lichen, while the algae provides food through photosynthesis. This helps to make it one of the hardiest things in the woods! It grows slowly, so a particularly large specimen may be decades old. It's in no danger of going extinct, and one of the ways in which it reproduces is through breaking off fragments which can then grow into new lichens. In fact, one of the ways you can tell old man's beard from closely related lichens is by carefully pulling a strand in two; it should stretch out a bit before breaking.

Contrary to popular belief, old man's beard does not kill trees. It does like to grow on sick trees because they have fewer leaves and so more sunlight is available to the lichen. It's also a good indicator of air quality, as it is sensitive to air pollution. Think of this valuable marker of ecological health as you enjoy this colorful year-round resident.