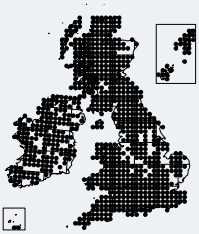
Ctenidium molluscum

Comb-moss

Key 304, 314, 316



Identification This very variable moss forms soft, closely branched, loose, yellowish-green patches. The common variety is var. *molluscum*. Typical shoots are 2–3 cm long, but var. *condensatum* and var. *robustum* can grow considerably bigger. Leaves are 1–2 mm long (but smaller on the branches), broadly triangular, strongly curved in the same direction, nerveless and undulate. The tip of the branches is often hooked and seems more shiny than the rest of the branch because the leaves overlap one another so densely. Var. *sylvaticum* has stout branches and a strongly hooked branch tip. Var. *condensatum* has creeping, pinnately branched stems. Var. *robustum* has erect, irregularly branched stems that form tufts. Var. *fastigiatum* is very slender, with erect stems and branches up to 3 cm tall. Capsules are rare.

Similar species This widespread and notoriously variable moss could potentially be confused with many other pleurocarps with strongly curved leaves. *Palustriella commutata* (p. 698) has a nerve and is more rigid and regularly branched. *Hypnum* species (pp. 802–810) are darker green, lack the golden yellow shoot tip, and have narrower, less strongly curved leaves. *Cratoneuron filicinum* (p. 701) is a rather scruffier plant which is less densely branched with less strongly curved leaves and a nerve. *C. procerrimum* (Smith, p. 920) has glossy, golden brown, regularly pinnate shoots. It is very rare in turf on friable, calcareous mica-schist in the Scottish mountains.

Habitat Varieties of this plant are found in many calcareous habitats such as woods, banks, cliffs, flushes and grassland. It may grow on rocks or soil and, as an indicator of base-rich conditions, its presence frequently alerts the bryologist to the possibility of uncommon species nearby. Var. *sylvaticum* is fairly frequent on acidic soil and humus in woods in southern England. Var. *condensatum* is scarce on damp, shaded cliffs, in flushes, and in scree. Var. *robustum* is rare on sheltered, base-rich rocks in the mountains. Var. *fastigiatum* is also rare on base-rich rocks at high altitudes.

Photos Fred Rumsey (left) & Sean Edwards (right) Text Jonathan Sleath