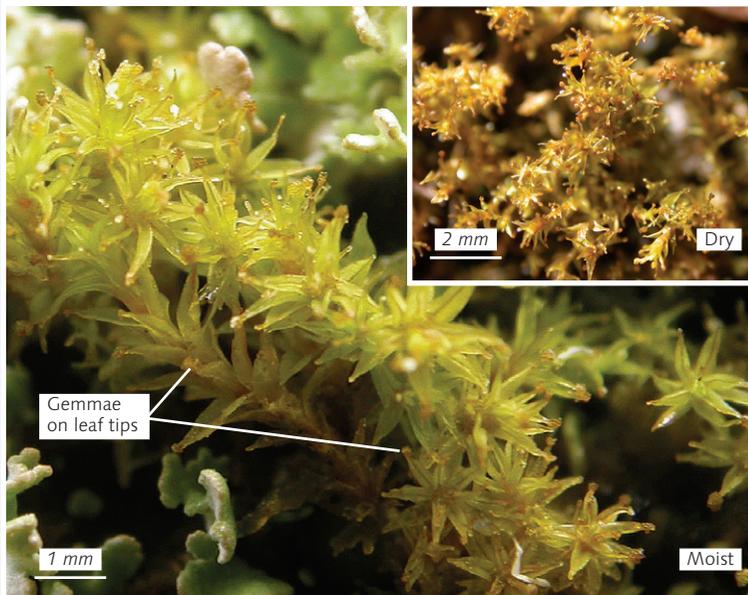


Leptodontium gemmascens

Thatch moss



Identification This species forms small, yellow-green cushions or scattered shoots. Although only a few millimetres tall, with leaves a little over 1 mm long, it is easy to recognize on account of the characteristic cluster of tiny, green gemmae perched on an excurrent nerve at the leaf tip, and easily seen with a hand lens. The spearhead-shaped leaves taper to a coarsely toothed tip. Capsules are unknown, so the gemmae provide the main means of dispersal.

Similar species *Ulota phyllantha* (p. 664) has clusters of gemmae on the leaf tip, but grows on trees and is normally much larger, with brown, cigar-shaped gemmae. *Aulacomnium androgynum* (p. 627) also has clusters of gemmae, but these occur on stalks at the tip of the stems. *L. flexifolium* (p. 444) may also occur on thatch, but can be distinguished by its broader leaf tip, coarser teeth on the upper leaf margins and the nerve ending well below the leaf tip, which lacks gemmae. Some plants of *L. gemmascens* lack gemmae, but the coarse teeth on the upper leaf margins rule out other small mosses such as *Barbula convoluta* (p. 454), and the habitat excludes confusion with mosses of disturbed soil, such as *Hennediella* species (pp. 490–491) which also have toothed (albeit weakly) margins at the leaf tip.

Habitat *L. gemmascens* is most characteristic of weathered wheat or reed thatch that is typically 10 years or more old, but sometimes on thatch that is only 5 years old. Often it is found on damper areas of a roof such as chimney gullies or at the eaves, and is most frequent in south-west England. However, *L. gemmascens* also occurs in a few rough, acidic grasslands (mainly in eastern England), growing on decaying leaf bases of grasses and rushes; in such places it even grows on rabbit droppings. It has also been recorded from rotten debris in an old, pollarded willow (*Salix*).