

# Bromeliads

## Info Sheet

Bromeliads are members of a distinct plant family, *Bromeliaceae*, with more than 2500 species. Most are native to the Americas. Several species are native to Florida and are protected by conservation laws. Spanish moss (*Tillandsia usneoides*) and the pineapple (*Ananas comosus*) are two of the most familiar bromeliads. Many uncultivated bromeliads grow on trees or shrubs as air plants. Their roots are mainly used for support; bromeliads are not parasites. Others grow on rocks or in the ground. Some are found exhibiting all three growth patterns.

Although Bromeliads are divided into over 50 different genera, they generally share similar cultural requirements:

### POTTING AND POTTING MEDIA

Most bromeliads, with the exception of the gray leafed *Tillandsias*, will do well potted in containers. Any medium that is well drained, does not pack down and that provides some stability is acceptable. Many commercial mixes are suitable for bromeliads if you add perlite, coarse builders' sand, tree fern fiber, pine bark or other similar additives that will help the mix drain rapidly.

When planting, be sure the bromeliad is not planted too deeply; use a pot suited to the size of the bromeliad; stake the offset, if necessary, and keep it in low light until it is well rooted in the mix.

### WATERING

If a bromeliad has a central cup (formed by the overlapping leaves), you should keep some water in that cup at all times. The root mass likes to be moist, but never soggy. It is perfectly fine to allow the mix to dry out just a bit between watering in many of the genera. *Cryptanthus* and many *Pitcairnia* and *Dyckia* species like to be moist all the time. As a general rule, soft leafed bromeliads require more water and humidity than stiff leafed bromeliads.

If you mount bromeliads on wood bases, they will require more water than the same plant left in a pot. A weekly soaking will often suffice. **Do not use bromeliads on or near pressure treated wood and never use copper based products on bromeliads.** Both are toxic and will kill the plants.

If your water is salty or very alkaline, you would do well to flush out the cups every few weeks to prevent the buildup of dissolved salts which could harm the leaf tissue.

### LIGHT

Most bromeliads will grow with bright, diffused light, regardless of the type of light they prefer in habitat. In general, bromeliads with stiff leaves that have spines on the edges can tolerate much brighter light than bromeliads with soft, spineless leaves. Most bromeliads grown in commercial greenhouses can be grown inside the home for long periods of time. The light levels on a screened porch, lanai, or under pool screening is usually adequate for most bromeliads. You

can usually adapt a bromeliad into lower or higher levels of light as long as the process is gradual. Soft drooping leaves that are longer than usual indicate too little light; yellowed leaves with faded markings indicate too much light.

### FERTILIZING

Growers are divided on this topic. Many growers NEVER fertilize *Neoregelias* and *Billbergias*: fertilizing these types of bromeliads will result in loss of color and long, strappy growth. When planted in the landscape bromeliads can do quite well without any fertilizer at all.

You can safely use either Jack's Classic 20-20-20 water-soluble fertilizer at a rate of one-quarter to one-eighth of the recommended strength. Apply to the leaves as well as in the bromeliad cup during the early, cool morning hours and never in the sun. Flush the cups a few hours after applying to prevent burn to the leaves.

### COLD TOLERANCE

Bromeliads in general are NOT cold hardy plants. Some genera and some species are more cold tolerant than others; it is best to ask when you acquire a new bromeliad. Be prepared to provide some cold protection should the temperatures drop below 45 degrees.

### OFFSETS

Once most bromeliads have flowered, they begin to send out basal offsets, called pups, offsets or offshoots. These can be safely removed when they are about one third to one half the size of the mother plant. Cut as close as possible to the mother plant with a sharp knife or garden scissors. Some species send out offsets on long stolons, making offset removal easier. Stake or anchor the offset, if necessary, and keep it in low light until it is well rooted in the mix.

Remove old basal leaves from offsets, and if possible, dip the end in a rooting hormone before planting. The parent plant should continue to send out additional offsets until it is completely spent.

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## DISEASE AND PEST PROBLEMS

As a rule, bromeliads are essentially free of pest and disease problems. Scale, in one form or another, is a problem in Florida and can be treated with Insecticidal Soap. Fungus is generally caused by cultivation problems. Be sure not to crowd your bromeliads and make sure they are in an area with good circulation (if grown indoors, do keep them away from heat and air conditioning vents).

A popular misconception is that bromeliad cups encourage mosquito breeding—usually the small frogs that live in bromeliad cups eat mosquito larvae as fast as it is produced. Regularly flushing leaves and debris out of bromeliads will also lessen any mosquito impact.

## BRINGING BROMELIADS INTO BLOOM

All bromeliads will flower when they are mature. Most bromeliads bloom only ONCE; offsets tend to flower within 8 months to 2 years later. The foliage on most bromeliads is so spectacular that the bloom spike is a bonus!

## GROOMING

As with all plants, the lower leaves will decline. Remove old leaves by holding the base of the plant and gently peeling off the old leaf.

## General Care for several types of popular Bromeliads:

**Aechmea:** The 'Silver Urn' (*A. fasciata*) is a very popular member of the Aechmea group. It has dark, green leaves with silvery bands and a beautiful pink flower. It produces many off-shoots and is an easy bromeliad for beginners.

**Water:** Allow potting medium to dry between watering; water in the "cups" at all times.

**Light:** Morning sun or bright light.

**Potting medium:** Well draining soil or soil and bark.

**Ananas:** Pineapples (*A. cosmosus*) are the most well known members of this group. As with many other bromeliads, the center of *A. cosmosus* flushes red right before it flowers. A tall stalk grows from the center; the pineapple fruit develops on the top of this stalk. You may need to stake the stalk as the fruit gets heavier.

**Water:** Keep potting medium evenly moist; mist occasionally.

**Light:** Bright light.

**Potting Medium:** Well draining soil, bark, or soil and bark.

**Cryptanthus:** These bromeliads are popular for their beautiful leaves. The flowers are small and deep inside the center of the plant. *Do not put water in the center of these plants! When watering, do not soak the leaves. Bright light is necessary to maintain the color of the foliage.* Cryptanthus are free with off-shoots, which grow from the base of the plant and in between the leaves. When the off-shoots are 1 1/2"-2", gently tug them, and they will release from the mother plant. Keep the soil somewhat moist until the new plant takes root. Do not be deceived by a declining mother plant; it will produce off-shoots until it dies completely. Ruby Red, Pink Starlite and Elaine are popular varieties.

**Water:** For the mature plant, allow potting medium to dry between watering. Do not water center of plants.

**Light:** Bright light to morning sun or filtered light.

**Potting Medium:** Well-draining soil; soil, bark and perlite; soil and sphagnum moss.

**Guzmania:** The flower of this plant lasts for months. These bromeliads like moderate to low light; they cannot take full sun. This plant likes to be misted frequently, especially during the summer.

**Water:** Keep the potting medium moist and the water "cups" full.

**Light:** Medium to low or filtered light.

**Potting Medium:** Very loose soil; or a mixture of soil and perlite or bark.

**Neoregelia:** *N. carolinae* and its variations are very popular for their green or green and white striped leaves. The center of these plants flushes deep red just before they flower.

**Water:** Allow potting medium to dry between watering; keep water in its "cups".

**Light:** Some sun to partial shade.

**Potting Medium:** Well draining soil; soil, perlite and bark.

**Tillandsia:** Tillandsias are true air plants- *they do not grow in soil.* Some are commonly found in Brevard, growing in trees. The best known is Spanish moss or *T. usneoides*.

**Water:** Mist in the morning- *do not soak the leaves.*

**Light:** Sun to filtered light.

**Potting Medium:** Fir bark, tree fern slabs, pieces of drift wood or cork slabs.

**Light:** Some sun to low light.

**Potting Medium:** A mixture of fir bark and soil.