
Bromeliads

The bromeliad family is large and varied. Its two best-known members, pineapples and Spanish moss, give an idea of the diversity of this group of plants. Most bromeliads are easy to grow indoors or in the greenhouse. They have attractive forms and leaf colors, many with flowers that can last for months.

HEIGHT/SPREAD

Bromeliads grown as houseplants vary in size from one inch to 2 to 3 feet tall.

GROWTH RATE

Bromeliads are fairly long-lived and slow-growing houseplants. Although the central plant dies after flowering, they produce "pups" that can be separated and potted up to form new plants.

ORNAMENTAL FEATURES

Most bromeliads have very attractive foliage. The leaves may be broad and leathery or fine and wiry. Many are colorfully banded and variegated. Others have silvery gray scales covering the leaves. In many types of bromeliads the thick, broad leaves form funnel-shaped rosettes called tanks, which hold water. Many bromeliads also develop beautiful flowering stalks.

CULTURE

Bromeliads are either epiphytic or terrestrial.

Epiphytic plants do not live in soil but survive by clinging to a tree or other supports such as rocks. Epiphytes are not parasites. They do not harm the host plant in any way, but merely use them for support. Epiphytes obtain all their water and mineral needs from the air. Epiphytic bromeliads can be either grown in soil or mounted on a board, branch, shell or various other surfaces. They must be firmly attached.

Terrestrial bromeliads require soil for growth like most other houseplants.

Bromeliads need [strong light](#) to grow well and produce flowers. Most bromeliads require filtered light, with a few exceptions. Bromeliads need warm temperatures to survive and grow well. Temperatures should be at least 60 to 70 °F.

Water bromeliads well and allow the soil to dry before [watering](#) again. Many bromeliads hold water in a leaf cup called a tank. The tank should be kept filled with water at all times. Be careful when you fill the tank not to let water soak the soil. Bromeliads are prone to root rots if the soil is kept wet. Flush the tank periodically by pouring fresh water into it, inverting and filling again. This will prevent stagnation and buildup of mineral salts.

Proper drainage is essential. The [soil mix](#) must be porous enough to allow water to drain off quickly and allow air to reach the roots. It should never be soggy.

Bromeliads need humid air to prosper. Most houses are not moist enough and you will need to provide humidity for your plants by misting them frequently. This is especially vital for "air plants" that obtain moisture from the air.

Bromeliads need [fertilizer](#) but use it at half strength or less. Mist the leaves in summer with very diluted liquid fertilizer.

You can force bromeliads to flower by placing the plant inside a clear, airtight plastic bag with a ripe apple for two to three days. Depending on the type of plant you have, flowering will begin in six to fourteen weeks. After flowering, the parent plant dies. Offshoots, or pups, provide for the steady renewal of the plant.

PROBLEMS

In the home, plant diseases are rarely a problem. Too much or too little water plus insects and mites are the main problems. Root rot usually results from a soil mix that does not drain quickly or overly frequent watering. Scale and mealy bugs are the most frequent insect pests of bromeliads.

GENERA, SPECIES AND CULTIVARS

Urn Plants (*Aechmea* species): Urn plants are easy, dependable bloomers. They have tremendous diversity of color, form and texture. Spiny-edged leaves may be solid green, other colors, speckled or have bands of silver scales.

Nearly all do well when mounted, provided they are started young, before the plants are large. Give them bright light and very warm temperatures. Keep their cup filled with water, but allow the potting mix to dry between waterings. Fertilize lightly in summer only.

- *Aechmea fasciata*: This commonly available funnel-shaped plant has leaves that are curved at the top and numerous light blue flowers borne in a dense pink spike.
- *Aechmea fendleri*: A large panicle of blue berries and almost purplish bracts top a 24 -to 30-inch rosette of light green leaves.
- *Aechmea 'Foster's Favorite'*: Upright rosette with striking lacquered wine red leaves; pendant spike of coral red pear-shaped berries tipped with midnight blue flowers.
- *Aechmea chantinii*: Colorful open rosette of hard olive green leaves with pronounced pinkish gray cross bands. The flower stalk is a branched spike with tight red bracts tipped yellow.

Pineapple (*Ananas* species): Ornamental pineapples are large plants with leaves that can reach three to five feet long. They require strong light, rich soil, regular feeding and plenty of moisture.

The plants have dense rosettes of spiny leaves from which the flower develops to produce a typical pineapple-shaped fruit. Pineapples can be propagated from pups at the base of the plant or by planting the topknot of the fruit.

- *Variegated Pineapple (A. comosus v. variegatus)*: Variegated pineapple has longitudinally striped leaves that turn pink in bright light.
- *Red Pineapple (A. bracteatus v. tricolor)*: The fruit is large and reddish, with numerous offsets at the bottom.
- *Dwarf Pineapple (A. nanus)*: Dwarf pineapple looks like a dwarf version of *A. comosus* with tiny, thumb-size fruit.

Earth Stars (*Cryptanthus* species): Earth stars grow almost flat against the ground and resemble brightly colored starfish. The solid, striped or banded leaves may be green, brown, bronze, silver, white or pink. The flowers are inconspicuous. Earth stars are terrestrial bromeliads, and their growth requirements are different from epiphytic bromeliads. They cannot be mounted and need to be grown in rich, organic soil. Allow the mixture to dry slightly between waterings and fertilize monthly from mid spring through early fall. They grow well in bright diffused light. Earth star's compact size makes them ideal for dish gardens.

- *Cryptanthus bromelioides var. Tricolor*: The beautiful foliage is striped white on green.
- *Cryptanthus 'It'*: White-and green-striped leaves are tinged pink on plants grown in bright light.
- *Cryptanthus fosteriana*: This earth star has chocolate-brown leaves with zebra-like gray stripes.
- *Cryptanthus zonatus 'Zebrinus'*: 'Zebrinus' has reddish-brown leaves with zigzag silvery bands.
- *Cryptanthus 'Black Prince'*: 'Black Prince' has deep maroon to almost black foliage; the leaves are stiff and fleshy.

Air Pine or Living Vase (*Guzmania* species): Air pines are spectacular in bloom. The flower spikes grow out of the center of the plants and long-lasting, brilliantly colorful bracts. The graceful green or variegated pliable leaves lack spines. Guzmanias can grow in containers or on trees.

Guzmanias are more sensitive than many other bromeliads. They need moderate light, stable warm temperatures, and constantly moist air. To ensure success, maintain high humidity and good air movement. The hybrids are generally easier to grow than the species and are usually more spectacular.

- *Guzmania lingulata*: The flower stalk grows out of the rosette of leaves and has bracts ranging in color from yellow to orange to red to deep purple. Many color variations have been selected and named. *G. lingulata* and its hybrids are easy to grow.
- *Guzmania zahnii*: This air pine has a brilliant red and yellow flower stalk. It is easy to grow, but some of the hybrids developed from it are more challenging.

Blushing Bromeliad or Fingernail Plant (*Neoregelia* species): Neoregelias are spectacular foliage plants. They provide riots of color with their green, bronze, yellow, orange, red, purple, pink and white leaves. The colors often change when the plants begin to flower.

Neoregelia do best when underpotted and underfed, grown on the dry side in strong light. Frequent fertilization or too little light will cause the leaves to turn green. Keep water in the cup.

- *Neoregelia spectabilis*: Leaves are narrow, gray-striped beneath, green above with red tips. The inner leaves are edged in purple with blue flowers.
- *Neoregelia carolinæ*: When in flower, the leaves turn red attracting insect pollinators. In its natural habitat, this plant is often used as a shelter by many animals including frogs.
- *Neoregelia* 'Guinea': This highly speckled bromeliad is a small grower at about 6 to 8 inches in a compact, somewhat upright rosette.
- *Neoregelia meyendorffii* 'Spineless': Growth is compact, in tight rosettes. The leaves are glossy, and flush bright red at flowering.
- *Neoregelia* 'Morado': A wide-leafed purple-centered plant that will reach maximum color in low light conditions. The deep green, white-edged leaves flush when in bloom. In strong light it develops dark concentric bands.

Air Plants (*Tillandsia* species): Tillandsias are the largest group of epiphytic bromeliads. They are twisted wiry plants whose leaves are covered with silver-grey scales. Some have plain green leaves. Several have bright pink flower stalks and blue, purple, red, orange or white flowers. The leaves flush red on flowering plants.

Tillandsias are easy to take care of. Generally, tillandsias with hard, silver-grey leaves can be mounted on driftwood or another support in bright filtered sunlight. Grow tillandsias with soft green leaves in less light, in containers and keep them moister.

Tillandsias need frequent (every two to three days) misting to provide needed moisture. You can also immerse the entire plant in room-temperature water for about half an hour every week to 10 days. Tillandsias can be grown in a kitchen or bathroom window, where the humidity from washing dishes or taking showers will supply them with water. They should be misted occasionally with very dilute liquid fertilizer.

The tiny silver scales that cover the plant absorb all its moisture and nutrients. The scales are essential to the plant's survival. Handle the plants as little as possible to avoid accidentally rubbing off the scales.

- *Tillandsia cyanea*: This is the most popular species of air plant. Striking pink quill-like bracts surround large, bright purple flowers. The foliage of this terrestrial species is a mass of thin, recurved green leaves in rosette form. Easily grown indoors in bright, filtered sunlight. Needs moist soil. Can be mounted on branches if moss is used at its base.
- *Tillandsia caput-medusae*: This weird, but easy to grow, clumping species has silvery twisty leaves and a bulbous base. The flower stalk is red.
- *Tillandsia plumosa*: This plant forms a ball of fuzzy silver leaves that grow on rocks and limbs in dry forests.
- *Tillandsia usneoides* - Spanish Moss: Spanish moss is native from the coast to the lower piedmont in South Carolina. The slender stems hang to 20 feet or more over trees, fences and telephone wires. It can also be grown indoors in bright light.
- *Tillandsia utriculata* v. *pringleyi*: A decorative species with rather thin, grayish silver leaves in an upright rosette. The flower stalk is branched and red to orange or pink, with green.

VRIESEAS: Vrieseas are large bromeliads, and may reach 2 to 3 feet or more tall as houseplants. Many have exotically patterned and colorful, spineless foliage. Others have solid green, soft leaves. They flower in late winter with brightly colored flower spikes that last several months.

Vrieseas are epiphytes. They have shallow root systems and should be kept relatively dry. They are much like guzmanias in their cultural needs. Give them moderate light, stable warm temperatures, and constantly moist air. They may be fed through the leaves with very dilute liquid fertilizer.

The soft, green-leafed species and their hybrids prefer more moisture and shade, while plants with banded or silvery leaves should be grown with less water and more light.

- *V. flammaea*: Red flowers, recommended for beginning bromeliad growers.
- *V. carinata*: Compact, has a flat flower stalk, with yellow, orange or red bracts. It has been used to produce many hybrids.
- *V. bleheri*: Green leaves shaded purple and bright yellow bracts.
- *V. guttata*: The green leaves are spotted brown. Pendulous flowers lined with pink bracts.
- *V. saundersii*: Compact, has beautiful silver-grey leaves.
- *V. fenestralis*: has yellow-green leaves marked dark green.
- *V. fosteriana*: Red-brown markings on green leaves.

Hybrid Vrieseas:

- ‘Christianne’: Glossy green leaves with bright, waxy red spikes and yellow flowers. Rarely exceeds 12 inches.
- ‘Splenet’: The dark green leaves are marked with wide purplish black bands. Bright yellow flowers emerge from a vibrant red-orange spike.
- ‘Charlotte’ An excellent plant with a colorful branched spike of yellow, with a little red. They can grow to 18 inches tall or so but will stay smaller if grown in a small container
- ‘Ella’: A small hybrid with crimson branches and yellow flowers. Perfect for terrariums or other small spaces.

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