

Bromeliad Care and Culture

Colorful Bromeliads and Tillandsias make excellent houseplants! They require very little care and are quite hardy.

Like an orchid, the bracts of a Bromeliad will keep their bright hues for long periods of time. Many will last a good 6 or 8 months before turning brown and withering away. Unlike an orchid, the original “mother plant” does not re-bloom or send up more spikes of colored bracts. It *will*, however, produce 2 to 3 “pup plants” at its base that can be removed and transplanted.

LIGHT

Bromeliads will tolerate a wide range of light intensities, including low light. Generally, plants with hard, thick, grey, grey-green and fuzzy leaves will take the highest light levels. These are the Aechmeas, Tillandsias, Ananas (Pineapple) and Billbergia. Those with soft, green, thin leaves such as Guzmania, Neoregelia and Vriesia do best under lower light levels. If the leaves become yellowish or pale green, the light level is too high. If the plant becomes very dark green or the colored bracts darken, the light is too low.

HUMIDITY

A relative humidity of 40% to 60% is best. Unfortunately, the average home is well below 40%, especially in the winter when the heater is on. Humidity around the plants can be improved by placing the pots in saucers filled with gravel or pebbles. Do not allow the pots to stand in water because this will waterlog the soil, possibly causing root rot. Misting is also helpful.

AIR CIRCULATION

Because Bromeliads are epiphytes, they require good air circulation. Fresh air supplies them with carbon dioxide and moisture. Plants in stagnant air are more susceptible to scale insects and fungal diseases. (Simply opening a window on days that are not too cold is sufficient.)

WATER

Bromeliads are tolerant of low moisture conditions. Most problems encountered with these plants are usually associated with rot caused by overwatering. Plants grown in pots should be watered thoroughly until water runs out the bottom. Do not water again until the soil surface feels dry. Every 10 days to even 3 weeks should be sufficient.

Should the leaves start to curl up, your plant is too dry. Many Bromeliads form a rosette of leaves creating a “vase”. It’s not necessary to keep this “vase” filled with water. Keeping it full of water, especially in low light areas, encourages bacteria and fungal problems. The best method is to fill this vase after watering the soil. Empty out the stagnant water after a couple of weeks, and then wait a week before refilling. It is also helpful to hose or shower your plants off every month to remove dust from leaves.



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Epiphytes such as Tillandsia absorb water directly through their leaves. They should be misted or dunked daily in hot summer months and once or twice a week in the winter. These plants are more susceptible to under-watering. If leaf edges begin to curl up, your plant is drying out. Soaking overnight will remedy this. (During the hottest months of year, it's best to soak your plants overnight once a week or every other week.)

FERTILIZER

Feeding should only be done in the late spring and summer. During the winter or under low light, Bromeliads need no feeding. Use a water-soluble fertilizer at 1/3 the recommended dosage applied to the soil only. Do not fill the vase of the plant or apply at all to Tillandsias as the fertilizer salts can burn newly emerging leaves. We recommend Maxsea 16-16-16 or Schultz Cactus Food once a month (May through August).

THE FLOWER IS FINISHED

Even when the environment is perfect, nothing you do will prevent the colorful "bloom" from fading and eventually getting ugly. You may not have any color but you can continue to grow the plant so it produces new pup plants. In all honesty, most people, without a little guilt, simply throw the plant away and get a new one. With a sharp pair of clippers, snip off the flowering stalk as far back into the vase as you can. You will have to do this with Guzmanias, Vriesias and Aechmenas. It is advised to place the plant in a brighter location if it was in low light.

TRANSPLANTING

New plants called 'pups' will grow from the side of the mother plant near its base. Wait until the mother plant is nearly dead before removing them. The pups will be 1/3 to 1/2 the size of the mother. Remove with a sharp knife or clippers.

A prepared orchid mix is ideal to pot your pups in or you can make your own mix using 1 part peat, 1 part fine bark and 1 part sand or perlite. Enclose the pot in a plastic bag for the first 3 or 4 weeks to maintain a humid environment. When your new plants have reached an acceptable size, you can treat or "train" them to bloom by putting them in a paper bag with an apple. Apples produce ethylene, which stimulate flowering. Leave your new plants in the "apple bag" for 3 or 4 days. You should see the beginnings of a flower spike in about 6 to 8 weeks after treatment.