



William T. Kemper Center for Home Gardening

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Bromeliad Care and Culture

In general bromeliads are stiff leaved, rosette forming plants with brightly colored leaves, bracts and flowers. The most famous is the pineapple (*Ananas comosus*). They are in the bromeliaceae family, which numbers over 2,800 species divided into 56 genera. They can be found growing in the wild from Florida and the West Indies to Mexico and into Central and South America. Adapting to a wide range of growing conditions, large numbers of the family are found in tropical rainforests but some such as *Guzmania* spp. are found in the Andes Mountains at altitudes as high as 11,500 feet, while others are found on sea shores.

The majority of bromeliads are epiphytic, meaning they grow on the branches of trees without taking nutrients from the tree. Other members of the family are lithophytic meaning that they reside on rocks. And, the remaining members are terrestrial, growing in soil. One of the smallest bromeliads is *Tillandsia* spp., which can be only 2 or 3 inches tall. They have been found growing on sheer limestone cliffs in full sun appearing as if someone glued it to a rock in mid air. The largest of the bromeliads, *Puya raimondii*, is a terrestrial plant that grows high in the Andes Mountains of Peru. They have been found growing at altitudes of more than 6,500 feet. In this rough nearly barren and rocky soil, *Puya raimondii* can grow to more than 6 feet tall and wide and with a 15 foot, compound, floral raceme can stand over 21 feet tall.

There are also terrestrial bromeliads such as *Cryptanthus* spp. that grow in barren rocky soil in the cloud forests of Ecuador. There is close to zero yearly rainfall in this habitat but large billows of clouds and fog roll in from the Pacific Ocean and this small plant collects moisture in the middle of its rosette.

Bromeliad Care

To grow a healthy bromeliad in your home it helps to know which type you have so your care can mimic the conditions of its natural habitat. Should you not be able to determine the native origin of your plant, however, there are some things that most Bromeliads like in common.

The one thing most bromeliads have in common is the rosette formation of the leaves. This rosette can collect and hold rainwater, falling leaves and forest debris from which the plant draws nutrients as they decay. By using rainwater or tap water that has been allowed to sit for a day or two to remove chlorine and fluorine to water bromeliads in the center of the rosette “cup” of the plant works well to mimic nature. Freshen the water within this “cup”, occasionally by over filling it until water spills over into the flowerpot.

Another common need of bromeliads is well-drained soil. The terrestrial bromeliads, growing in rocky barren conditions, hold very little moisture near the roots. In the rain forest, bromeliad roots function mainly to anchor the plant to a branch. This means that a light well draining soil allowing good aeration is important. It can also benefit the plant to grow it in a porous, terracotta pot that allows oxygen to the roots. This can help to avoid rotting.

In summertime in St. Louis, with typical humid air, the plants enjoy being placed outside under a tree or similar bright position out of direct sun. Bring the plants inside when the nighttime temperatures fall below 55 degrees Fahrenheit.

Bromeliads are often sold with bracts and flowers already present. They can retain the bracts for months. When the flowers are spent the bract can be removed. Soon the plant should put on new growth, usually on the outside of the original rosette. (*Vriesia*, however, can sometimes develop new plants within the original rosette). These new growths are referred to as "pups". As these new "pups" grow, the original rosette often fades. At this time you can remove the pups and pot them individually or you can simply remove the faded rosette and repot the pups, altogether, in a larger pot for a specimen plant. The newly potted plant can take a long time to mature and flower again. The time until bloom varies greatly, depending upon the species. There are species that bloom annually and some that can take four years or more. *Puya raimondii* may take 20 years to bloom again naturally.

A Sampling of Bromeliad Genera

Aechmea

About 200 species often rhizomatous, mostly epiphytic perennials, growing in Southern Mexico, Central America, South America, and the West Indies.

Ananas

5 or 6 species of evergreen terrestrial perennials from South America. Habitats range from dry to extremely humid. Growing at low altitudes up to mountainous regions over 3,000 feet, they form spiny rosettes of lance shaped leaves and produce showy flowers that develop into fleshy large edible fruit.

Ananas comosus, pineapple

Bromelia

50 species of evergreen rhizomatous or suckering terrestrial or rarely epiphytic perennials in woodland scrub or rocky areas up to an altitude of 6,000 feet. Found in Central America, the West Indies and South America.

Billbergia

Genus of about 60 species of rosette forming rhizomatous or suckering, evergreen, mainly epiphytic or lithophytic perennials from scrubs, woodlands and forests at altitudes up to 5,500 feet, in Mexico, Central America, North East and Central South America.

Guzmania

A genus of over 180 stem-less, evergreen, mainly epiphytic perennials. Their native habitat occurs in South Florida, Central America, the West Indies and northern and western South America. They occur mainly in the Andean rainforests to an altitude of 11,500 feet.

Neoregelia

Approximately 70 species of evergreen, sometimes rhizomatous or stoloniferous, epiphytic or terrestrial perennials from coastal scrubs, woodlands, and rainforests, to 5,000 feet. They often have very colorful inner rosettes.

Puya

A genus of about 170 species of terrestrial evergreen perennials from rocky slopes up to 6,500 feet in the Andean mountains in South America, Costa Rica, Colombia, Guyana, North Brazil and North Central Argentina. Some grow with a caudex like stem.

Quesnelia

Genus of about 15 species of almost stem-less, evergreen perennials. Some are epiphytic while some are terrestrial, often with pendulous inflorescences with tubular flowers. They come from rainforest areas in Eastern Brazil and are found at altitudes up to 6,500 feet.

Tillandsia

Sometimes called "air plants". Genus of over 400 species of epiphytic, terrestrial or lithophytic perennials from scrub and woodland in southern United States, the West Indies and Central and South America.

Vriesia

Genus of about 250 species of rosette forming evergreen, mostly epiphytic perennials closely related to *Tillandsia*. They are found growing in forested and rocky areas at altitudes up to 8,000 feet in Mexico and Central America.