

Plants for Your Home and Office

Bromeliads

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From their appearance, bromeliads are considered unusual and exotic houseplants by most home gardeners. It's heartening to know that their culture is not exotic; in fact, bromeliads tolerate interior conditions as well as any other tropical foliage plant. The unusual appearance of bromeliads with all leaves forming a large water holding cup is totally functional and necessary for these plants in their natural habitat. In the home, this water-holding cup is convenient for watering and foolproof because it prevents any chance of over watering the plants

Most bromeliads are epiphytes and this is the reason the leaves form water- holding cups. The plants grow upon branches in the tops of trees in tropical forests. There is no soil in these locations so the plants have adapted their leaves to catch and store water in a vase-like basin or tank. The leaves are also adapted to absorb enough water from this basin to supply the plant's needs. Because bromeliad leaves are responsible for water uptake in many species, the roots in these species act mainly to support the plants by a tight attachment to the tree bark. In this way, epiphytic bromeliads benefit from their unusual appearance to compete and survive in their natural environment.

It is quite clear bromeliads are well adapted to survival in nature but do these adaptations allow bromeliads to be good houseplants? If you can accept the exotic appearance of bromeliad plants, their unusual variegated leaf colors, and amazingly striking flowers, you will have few problems with bromeliads indoors.

Bromeliads need moderate light to full sun when grown indoors. They can tolerate shady locations and bright locations because of their epiphytic nature. In the forest, plants may be shaded during a portion of the day by the leaves of the tree on which they are located or plants may be in full sun when there is a break in the leaf



Variegated Silver Vase



canopy or in the dry season when many of the leaves have fallen. In the home, bromeliads should be placed in an east, south or west window where they will receive full sun for 3 to 4 hours each day.

The growing medium and the watering frequency is different for bromeliads from most common houseplants. Use a loose extremely well-drained growing medium, which is suitable for all epiphytes, composed of large bark chips, osmunda fiber, large-size calcine clay, or tree fern fiber with small amounts of peat moss or vermiculite added to hold some moisture. The growing medium should be as well drained as a tree branch. If you wish, a tree branch may be used! When watering your bromeliads, simply fill the cup or basin formed by the base of the leaves. Do not water the growing medium! Overflow from the cup will add sufficient moisture to the medium. Fertilize the plants every 6 to 8 weeks with one-half strength, organic fertilizer added to the cup when you water normally. Be sure the young side shoots or pups receive water as soon as their cup is formed. Pups will not develop if they are not watered early in their development.

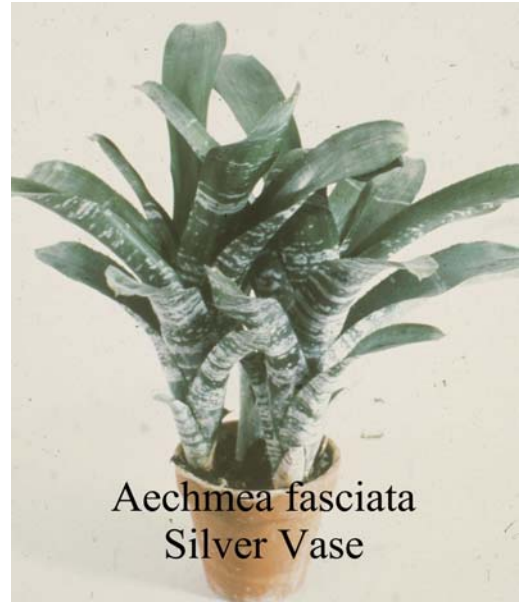
Bromeliads have an interesting life cycle that is important to any home gardener who grows them. Individual plants flower only once and then slowly die. The plant that dies is usually replaced by one to three new individuals so the bromeliad planting gets larger and larger each year with new plants. Individual plants that require 18 to 30 months of growth before flowering will die 6 to 12 months later but will be hidden beneath newly formed plants. Other species flower in shorter periods and produce many plants in 18 months.

Insects rarely attack bromeliads and diseases occur only on those plants in a heavy, soil growing medium.

Vegetative propagation makes bromeliad reproduction easy. Simply cut or break off young side shoots or pups after they are at least one-half their adult size. Plant the pup in a well-drained growing medium, keep the cup full of water and the new plant will develop. Propagation is important for bromeliad culture because most species will overgrow a container in two to four years.

The most common and one of the toughest bromeliads is the silver vase, *Aechmea fasciata*. Leaves of this plant are covered with bands of silver scales. The silver vase has violet flowers borne on a pink inflorescence that may remain on the plant for 6 months. Other cultivars and species of *Aechmea*, such as 'Royal Wine', and 'Foster Favorite', are also grown indoors for their colorful flowers and colored foliage. Closely related plants, summer torch (*Billbergia pyramidalis*), queen's tears (*B. nutans*), and the marbled rainbow plant (*B. 'Fantasia'*) resemble the Aechmeas but their flowers last for only a few days.

Painted feather and flaming sword are



common names that describe the inflorescence of bromeliads in the genus *Vriesea*. These species, *V. x 'Mariae'* and *V. splendens 'Major'*, have long-lasting bright orange-red flattened inflorescences, that stand high above their foliage. Common species and cultivars of *Guzmania*, *Neoregelia* and *Nidularium* have their cup formed by red colored young leaves that contrast with typical green or green and white striped leaves. Individual flowers are not unusual on *Guzmania* and *Nidularium* plants so the foliage is most important. The flowers of the crimson cup (*Neoregelia farinosa*) and the striped blushing bromeliad (*N. carolinae 'Tricolor'*) are unique because they seem to float on the water surface in the plant's reservoir after they are produced from a pin cushion-like inflorescence.



Neoregelia carolinae 'Tricolor'
Striped Blushing Bromeliad

The small, silvery bromeliads that are sold growing on wood pieces are in the genus *Tillandsia*. Many of these narrow-leaved species are native to South Florida where they are collected and placed on wood pieces for sale. Generally, these plants do not continue to grow when placed on boards but simply remain as dried



Tillandsia cyanea



Guzmania
Pink Starite

dead plants as an ornamental display. The blue flowered torch (*T. cyanea*) grows as other epiphytic bromeliads and produces a flattened, rose inflorescence with large lavender flowers.

Although the majority of bromeliads grown indoors are true epiphytes, a few grow naturally on the ground and not on tree branches. These ground bromeliads still required well-drained growing medium but their leaves do not form a water reservoir and their roots are responsible for water uptake. The most familiar ground bromeliad is the pineapple, *Ananas comosus*. Many home gardeners have grown their own pineapple plant from the top of a pineapple fruit. The tuft of leaves and one-half inch of fruit is removed from the fruit, allowed to air dry for 1 or 2 days, placed in shallow water until roots form and finally planted into a container. Typical pineapple plants get quite large and rarely flower in the home so the dwarf pineapple can be purchased with the fruit already formed.

The earth stars are another group of ground bromeliads that grow well indoors. Earth stars, such as the zebra plant (*Cryptanthus zonatus*), red earth star (*C. acaulis*, 'Ruber') and the color band (*C. x 'It'*), have red, bronze, copper, or white- striped leaves. The plants are quite small and their affinities to the other bromeliads are not clearly visible. Plants appear similar to succulent plants rather than bromeliads, because the leaves are firm and spiny. In fact, these plants live naturally in environments where other succulents would be found. Earth stars can be grown successfully in desert-like dish gardens with cacti and succulents. Bromeliads are excellent houseplants because they tolerate low humidity better than most plants and because they can be so easy to water. Few plants can bring exotic, tropical colors to your home as easily and as successfully as bromeliads.

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