

BROMELIADS

If you're looking for a forgiving plant that will easily adapt to your home's conditions, bromeliads are a great choice. A member of the pineapple family, this tropical plant comes in about as many sizes, shapes and colors as you can dream up, and their blooms are long lasting.

Before we get into plant care, there are a few fancy terms we should define. Bromeliads can be either "epiphytic" or "terrestrial" (or sometimes both). Epiphytic means that in their native, tropical habitats, these plants use their special roots to attach to tree branches or trunks and they gather their moisture and nutrients from the air and rain. Terrestrial simply means that they grow in the ground, like most plants do. Thanks to their adaptive nature, both terrestrial and epiphytic bromeliads can usually switch environments and do just fine. In short, this means most bromeliads you buy will do fine planted in containers. However, if you're looking for something a little different, some epiphytic bromeliads are available wired to driftwood or other supports. Rather than pouring water into a container, you mist these mounted plants regularly to give them the water they need.

Variety

With some 2,000 species of bromeliads, the diversity is astounding. You'll find everything from silver-and-white foliage to dark leaves, variegated foliage and even stripes and spots.

Here are a few of the more popular types of bromeliads:

Aechmea fasciata (the silver vase bromeliad), with its pink bloom, is very common, as are several other *Aechmea* species (often called urn plants).

Ornamental pineapple (*Ananas* species) can have leaves that are 3 to 5 ft. long.

Often referred to as earth stars, *Cryptanthus* species grow nearly flat and may have solid, banded or striped leaves.



Each issue, *Green Profit* organizes a ready-made class on livegood and hardgood topics in the form of a magazine page you can tear out, even giving it to customers who want questions answered, myths debunked and a reason to be in a garden environment, regardless of the season. You provide the customers and example products; we'll do the rest.

Guzmania species—sometimes called air pines or living vases, guzmanias are known for their blooms.

Neoregelia species are heralded for their colorful foliage.

Vrieseas grow 2 to 3 ft. tall as houseplants.

Tillandsias make up the largest group of epiphytic bromeliads, and you'll likely find these wired to driftwood or other supports.

Plant care

With such a wide range of bromeliads, it's wisest to first refer to any plant care instructions that may come with the plant(s) you buy. Here, we'll talk about bromeliads as a houseplant, though they can also be grown outdoors in frost-free areas.

Media. A bark-based growing medium is a good choice for bromeliads, though you'll find several different types of mixes recommended at various garden centers. Above all, it must drain well and quickly.

Containers. Your more traditional bromeliads will come in standard containers. Both clay and plastic containers work well, but you'll have to water more often with the clay containers. However, if you have large plants, a heavier clay or ceramic pot will be more stable. Since bromeliads are slow growing, you won't need to upgrade to larger pots as often as you would with other houseplants.

If you buy a truly epiphytic bromeliad, you can use a perforated plastic basket or a clay pot similar to those used for orchids, or you may mount it on wood or bark.

Water. The easiest way to avoid problems with bromeliads is to avoid overwatering. Only water when the soil surface feels dry. In most homes, this is no more than once a week.

One of the unique characteristics of bromeliads is the "cup" or "vase" formed in the center of the plant by overlapping leaves. This serves as a water reservoir. However, there's debate over whether or not you should keep this cup filled with water. Some say if you're already wetting the soil, you don't need to keep this cup filled. If you do fill it, be sure to flush the water often to prevent pest problems and salt buildup.

If you're growing the less common epiphytic bromeliads on bark or moss, they won't have the cup, and they'll absorb moisture through the air instead. In this case, misting will supply water to these plants. You can also put them under a faucet.

Humidity. This is one of the essential requirements for bromeliads. They prefer relative humidity levels of 40 to 60%. Since many homes aren't this humid, you can increase humidity levels by using an inexpensive humidifier or by placing the container on a 2- to 3-in. bed of wet gravel (just don't submerge the bottom of the pot in water—it can damage the roots!)

Temperature. Again, the adaptability of this plant means that it can survive anything from 40F to 100F. However, those aren't ideal temperatures for your home or your plants. So aim for optimal indoor temps of 70 to 75F during the day and 60 to 65F at night.

Light. While bromeliads will grow best in bright windows with southern, eastern or western exposure (but without direct rays of sun), their versatile nature means that they'll adapt to a wide range of light levels. In general, if your bromeliad has hard, thick, gray or gray-green foliage, it will withstand the highest light levels. Those plants with soft, green, thin leaves will grow better under lower light levels.

If your plant turns yellowish or pale green, it's probably getting too much light. If the foliage becomes very dark and/or elongated, the plant probably isn't getting enough light.

Fertilizer. During the winter months and/or under low light conditions, you probably won't need to fertilize your bromeliads at all. When plants are actively growing, a dosage of fertilizer can be applied at a low rate. For example, it's recommended that you use one-third to one-half of the dosage that the label recommends for liquid fertilizer, applied every one or two months. You may also apply controlled-release (pelleted) fertilizers.

Life span. While the plant you purchase will die after flowering, don't despair! Before they fade out, bromeliads will reproduce small plants that we call "pups." You can easily separate these and pot them up in new containers.

Problems. As mentioned above, the most common problem with bromeliads is overwatering, which can cause the roots to rot. Too much moisture can also promote insect problems. Watch out for scale and mealybugs, plus spider mites. If you have insect problems, isolate the plant and check with your garden center or a local extension agent for control solutions.

Finally, good air circulation will help promote healthy bromeliads. 🍃

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