

Home/Garden

Bromeliads

Sturdy plants for the casual gardener

Bromeliads are members of the same family as the pineapple. They are indigenous to the tropical and subtropical areas of Central, south and North America as well as islands of the Caribbean. They can be found growing in extremely diverse environments — deserts, rain forests and beaches.

Most bromeliads are naturally epiphytic, clinging to trees, or shrubs or even cactus as they grow, but taking their nourishment from the air as orchids do. They are not parasites. Generally speaking they are composed of a rosette of leaves from the center of which a blossom-bearing inflorescence or spike grows. The shape of the inflorescence varies from species to species. It can be long or short, flat or rounded, skinny or fat.

One of the most familiar of the bromeliads is *Aechmea Fasciata*, or urn plant, with its luscious fat pink flower spike rising out of the rosette of leaves. It will grow to good size, the heavy leaves with their silver stripes can be two feet long.

Aechmeas do not want direct sun, an east window where the light is bright should be good. Daytime temperatures should rise to 70 degrees or more, but can drop to 60 degrees at night. Since it is an air plant it should not be potted in soil, but in a mixture of coarse sand and sphagnum peat moss.

You can also use osmunda fiber as a potting medium. Keep this mixture moist and fertilize monthly. It's important to keep the cup at the base of the leaves filled with water during its growing season. Many people collect rain water for this purpose to most closely imitate natural conditions.

Many aechmeas are as notable for their striking foliage as for their flower-like bracts. *Aechmea chantinii* has horizontal striped silver and green leaves, and a red and gold flower; *A. mendocino* has green leaves with lengthwise pink and yellow stripes; and *A. romeroi* has pale green saw-toothed leaves with a strong pink flower spike.

Guzmanias are members of the bromeliad family with terrestrial-growing as well as epiphyte species. They produce flower spikes that stay in bloom for months. As with the aechmeas, these flower spikes are actually bracts, the

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flowers are not very noticeable. (Poinsettias are another plant that are valued for their long lasting bracts, not the inconspicuous flower in the middle.) Even guzmania foliage is often brilliantly colored.

Guzmanias like high humidity and they should be misted daily. They need bright indirect light and room temperatures that do not fall below 60 degrees at night. Water generously during the period of active growth and make sure the cup is filled with water — rainwater is ideal. Fertilize every two weeks with a half-strength solution of houseplant fertilizer. During the winter, stop fertilizing and allow the plant to become more dry.

Guzmania lingulata forms rosettes of straplike glossy green leaves that are over one foot tall and two feet across. Bright red bracts that last for over two months surround a small yellow and white flower. Aechmeas and guzmanias have such heavy leaves that they look like they will live forever. However, after these plants bloom they start to die. It will take several months for the plant to die off completely, but by that time it will have produced a new rosette at its base.

This new rosette should be cut off carefully with as much of its root as possible. Repot it as you did the parent plant. You can put this newly potted plant in a plastic bag for a couple of weeks to help it along. Then harden it off by leaving the bag open for part of the day for several days before removing it completely.

Bromeliads are sturdy plants that are easy to take care of. Because they require so little maintenance and the colorful blooms last so long, from six weeks to four months, they are ideal plants for the casual indoor gardener.

Sources: City Gardens, 11850 Van Dyke Ave., Detroit, MI 48234-4191, catalog \$1; Fox Orchids, Inc., 6615 W. Markham, Little Rock, AR, 72205; catalog \$1.

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