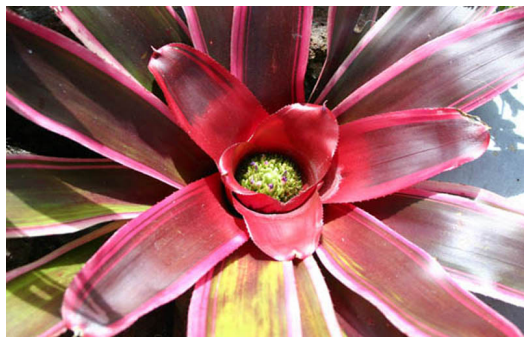




## **Bromeliads at a Glance<sup>1</sup>**

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Sydney Park Brown<sup>2</sup>



Bromeliads are easy-to-grow, low-maintenance plants that can be enjoyed indoors as houseplants, outside in containers, or, in warmer parts of Florida, as landscape plants. The bromeliads commonly sold at garden centers have colorful, long-lasting flower displays and/or brilliantly colored foliage. Other familiar bromeliads are Spanish moss, ball moss and the pineapple. In their native habitat, many bromeliads grow on trees as epiphytes—taking their moisture and nutrients from the atmosphere and the debris that decays in their “cups.” They are not parasites and will not harm the plants to which they are attached. This fact sheet offers basic information on growing these fascinating plants. For more detailed information, see Circular 1090 “Bromeliads” available from your county Extension office or on the web at: <http://edis.ifas.ufl.edu/pdffiles/MG/MG27200.pdf>

### **Bromeliads as Houseplants**

Bromeliads make excellent houseplants that will survive (but not grow) for many weeks under very low light conditions. They'll thrive on a porch, near a window or anywhere where they receive bright, diffused light, but no direct sun. A bromeliad will indicate whether light levels are satisfactory. A yellowish or pale green plant may indicate that the light level is too high. Conversely, dark green, soft, drooping leaves may be signs that light is too low. Water once every week or two. The simplest way is to put the plant in the sink or shower and allow lukewarm water to fill the cup and run over the leaves and into the soil. It is rarely necessary to fertilize bromeliads when grown as houseplants.

### **Bromeliads as Landscape or Container Plants**

Most bromeliads are tropical or subtropical and thrive outdoors in Florida's warm, humid environment. In north Florida, grow them in containers and move them indoors during freezes. Most prefer shade or partial shade, but some tolerate full sun. Even though they prefer moisture and humidity, they are extremely tolerant of low-moisture conditions and will survive prolonged periods of

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  2. Sydney Park-Brown, associate professor, and consumer horticulture specialist, Environmental Horticulture Department, Gulf Coast REC, Cooperative Extension Service, Institute of Food and Agricultural Sciences, University of Florida, Gainesville, 32611

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drought. Most problems with bromeliads are associated with root rot caused by too much moisture. Sandy, well-drained Florida soils are good for growing bromeliads. Amend heavy clay soils with 2 to 3 inches of organic matter (peat, leaf mold, compost, etc.) mixed into the planting bed. Potted plants need a light, porous potting mix.

Many bromeliads form a "cup" or "vase" in their centers which holds and absorbs water. Occasionally flush the cup with water to prevent stagnation and to remove the salts left when water in the cup evaporates. To prevent cold damage, remove water from the cup when temperatures below 40°F are likely. Cold damage appears as a brown line across each leaf at the water level.

Actively growing bromeliads respond to light applications of fertilizer. They require little or no fertilizer during the winter months, or under conditions of low light. A general purpose, soluble fertilizer can be applied to the soil of potted bromeliads every 1 to 2 months. Mix the fertilizer in water at 1/3 to 1/2 of the recommended dosage. It is best not to add fertilizer in the center cup because fertilizer salts could accumulate and burn new leaves.

You can grow some bromeliads on a board or piece of bark. Use staples, various glues, plastic-coated wire, or nylon stockings to attach them. Bromeliads can also be attached to the trunks of trees using glue and stockings to hold them in place until their roots attach securely to the tree trunk. Douse them with water when humidity or rainfall is low.

## Blooming and Propagation

Bromeliads slowly die over a period of a year or two after flowering. However, pups (young plants) usually develop at the base of the "mother" plant. Separate the pups from the mother plant when they are half the size of the parent plant. To start new plants, simply cut the pup off where it attaches to the mother plant and place it in potting soil. Many factors affect blooming—plant age, day length, light intensity, water and temperature. Some bromeliads bloom quite regularly while others do not. Bromeliad plants must be mature to flower. The time from the formation of a pup to maturity is approximately one

year, but some species take much longer. The foliage of most bromeliads is typically so interesting and/or colorful that the blooms are considered a bonus. Although it is probably best to let nature take its course, Circular 1090, "Bromeliads", offers information on how to force flowering.

## Pests

Mosquitoes will breed in the water-filled cups of bromeliads growing outdoors. Use a garden hose to occasionally rinse water from the cups and flush out mosquito eggs, larvae and decaying leaves and twigs, which are a food source to the larvae. A biological, mosquito control product (*Bacillus thuringiensis* subspecies *Israelensis*) is available from garden centers and home supply stores. The product can be sprinkled into bromeliad cups where it will kill some species of mosquito larvae in 24 hours.

The Mexican bromeliad weevil, *Metamasius callizona*, attacks native bromeliads, especially *Tillandsia*, but has been known to damage private and commercial collections as well. The adult weevils feed on the leaves and flower stalks, leaving unsightly marks. The larvae are more destructive, tunneling into the base of the plant, and separating the leaves from the roots. Symptoms include leaves that are browning or decomposing near the base, and sections of the plant falling away, resulting in the death of the plant. Some plants exude a clear, gelatin-like substance thought to be used in defense. In 2007, a biological control (a parasitic fly) was released in several parts of the state. For more information, see Featured Creatures at: [http://creatures.ifas.ufl.edu/orn/m\\_callizona.htm](http://creatures.ifas.ufl.edu/orn/m_callizona.htm)

Although the bromeliad is a fairly pest-free plant, scale and mealybug insects can sometimes be a problem. Your county Extension office can provide safe and effective management information: <http://solutionsforyourlife.ufl.edu/map/>

## References

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