

Growing Guide: Bromeliads

Fun Facts

- Pineapples are a type of bromeliad
- Spanish moss is also a type of bromeliad and was used to stuff mattresses
- The greatest number of bromeliad species is found in Brazil
- Many bromeliads only bloom once
- New species are still being discovered

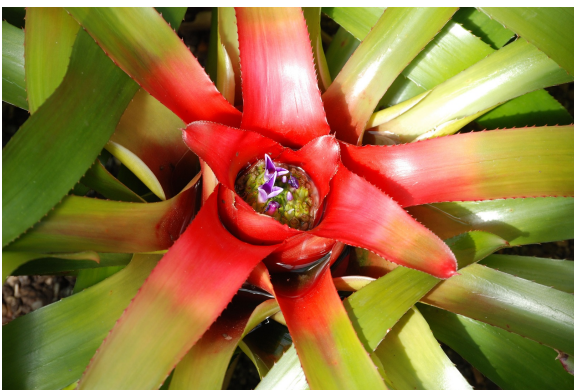


Relative newcomers to the scene, bromeliads have taken the houseplant world by storm! These intriguing, easy-care plants charm us with their dramatic leaf rosettes enhanced by a ring or spike of brightly colored bracts.

This article will focus on two types of bromeliads — ones that you’re most likely to find in a garden center.



Guzmanias: There are dozens of varieties; most have a rosette of strappy green or gray-green leaves and, when in bloom, a taller central spike of colorful bracts. The true flowers are tiny, usually white or yellow, and appear at the top of the spike.



Neoregelias: These form a more flattened rosette compared to the guzmanias. The leaves surrounding the central cup become flushed with bright color just prior to the plant blooming. The tiny flowers appear in the central cup.

Bromeliads in Their Native Habitat

Guzmanias and noregelias are two types of “tank bromeliads.” Species in this group grow a rosette of stiff, tightly overlapping leaves, creating a central cup, or tank. In the wild, these bromeliads are rainforest plants that perch on tree

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branches. They're epiphytes — plants that make their homes on other plants, without causing harm to their hosts.

In the rainforest, the central cup captures rainwater, as well as organic debris such as fallen leaves and wind-blown dust. Soon algae begin to colonize this reservoir, followed by larger life forms, such as insect larvae and even tree frogs! The cup becomes a tiny yet complex ecosystem. What does the bromeliad get in return for hosting these species? It absorbs nutrients from the decaying organic matter as plants, insects, and other debris decomposes in the cup.

Flower Power

Bromeliad plants spend their early lives as these simple leaf rosettes. Then, as they prepare to bloom, something magical happens: The leaves begin to change color and, in the case of guzmanias, a stalk with colorful leaves begins to form. These colorful leaves are, botanically speaking, bracts, which can be defined as modified leaves that are related to flowering. The true flowers are tiny and located in the central cup or at the top of the flower stalk. The plants you'll find for sale will most likely be in their flowering phase, because that's when they're most attractive.

Caring for Bromeliads

Transporting. Like most bromeliads, these are tropical plants that will be harmed by cold temperatures. If you're buying one and the outdoor temperature is below 50 degrees, wrap the plant in a fabric or paper bag, rush it out to a warmed-up car, and head right home.

Potting material. Because these bromeliads get most of their water and nutrients from their central cups, their roots are used mainly for anchoring the plant to its host. Although they live in the rainforest, the roots are exposed to air and don't like to be constantly wet. Therefore, a freely draining potting mix is very important. Regular potting soil holds too much moisture; better choices are special orchid or cactus potting mixes, or bark chips.

Pots and displays. A small pot is fine — one just large enough to accommodate the roots and a bit of potting material. The pot must have drainage holes. Guzmanias in particular can get top-heavy, so planting them in heavy, porous clay pots can prevent toppling. The plants can also be mounted on a piece of bark or driftwood, as long as the central cup remains upright.

Light. Give these plants bright, indirect light. An east- or west-facing window is ideal, as is a location a few feet away from a south-facing window. A south-facing window with sheer curtains offers bright light without the intensity of direct sun.

Temperature. Average household temperatures are fine; these bromeliads thrive in temperatures between 60 and 80 degrees F. Place the plants away from heating vents, air conditioners, doorway drafts, and cold windowpanes.

Watering. Keep water in the reservoir at all times. It doesn't need to be full — just a few teaspoons. Use room-temperature water, ideally rainwater or distilled water.

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For neoregelias, watering is easy because the cup is visible in the center of the flattened rosette. For guzmanias, use a watering can with a fine spout to pour water into the rosette formed by the lower leaves; avoid getting water in the colored bracts. If the plants are in pots, moisten the potting medium monthly, allowing excess water to drain completely. Soggy roots lead to rot.

In the rainforest, various organisms colonize the water reservoir; however, you may be less enthusiastic about mold growing and dead insects floating in the cup — or even mosquito larva wriggling about. Every few weeks, flush the water in the cup by filling it to overflowing and tipping the plant to let it drain, then add fresh water.

Fertilizing. Bromeliads need minimal fertilizing. During the summer when the plants are most actively growing, apply a water-soluble fertilizer at ¼ strength to the potting medium. Do this about once a month, letting excess drain.

Do not add fertilizer to the central cup.

Propagation

The colorful bracts and flower stalks can last for months. Alas, these bromeliads flower just once, after which the plants begin to fade. However, you'll likely see small plants, called offsets or pups, forming at the base of the plant. Be patient; the pups may not form until after the plant is finished flowering.

If you'd like to replot the pups and grow them to flowering size, wait until the pups are about 1/3 the size of the mother plant. Then use a sharp knife to cut the pup from the mother plant. (The pup may or may not have its own roots at this time.) Place the pup in a small pot filled with freely draining potting mix, burying the roots but not the leaves. The pup probably won't stay upright on its own at this point, so use several sticks or other means to prop it up. It can take a few years for the pup to grow into a mature, blooming plant.

In the meantime, the mother plant may remain an attractive rosette of leaves, and even continue to form additional pups!

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