CARE AND HANDLING

Numerous factors contribute to bromeliad blooms: time, light and water are just a few. One of the most important variables is temperature, with a minimum requirement of 50˚.

Many of the more popular types of bromeliads, including Aechmeas, Guzmanias, Neoregelias, Tillandsias and Vrieseas, bloom naturally during the spring and summer months. Guzmanias grow best with purified water and require more humidity than other types.

It is possible to prematurely force a bloom by exposing a bromeliad to ethylene gas, a natural byproduct of decomposing organic matter. Commercial products such as Florel, often used to ripen tomatoes and other fruits and vegetables, have successfully been used to produce bromeliad flowers.

OTHER ASSORTED FACTS

- Bromeliads are members of the Bromeliacae family, which also includes pineapples and Spanish moss.
- Biologists have catalogued more than 3,500 species of bromeliads, with new ones being added all the time.
- At least one-third of the species are air plants that grow on trees or rocks, using their roots only to hold themselves in place. They draw their water from clouds and fog, as well as from rainwater stored in the "tanks" formed by tight rosettes of leaves.
- In upper reaches of tropical rain forests, these tanks serve as miniature ecosystems, providing a critical source of water for such diverse creatures as birds, snakes, lizards, frogs, snails, dragonflies, beetles, ants, butterflies, crabs, opossums and even other plants.

PROPAGATION

Bromeliads are easy to asexually propagate once an offset, or "pup" has sprouted from the base of the original bromeliad, or "mother plant." The advantage of asexual propagation is that you are rewarded with a mature plant in less than nine months. Pups usually emerge from the soil near the edge of the pot. They should be allowed to grow until they are one-third to one-half the size of the mother plant and have several sets of leaves.

Besides a mother plant with a pup, you'll need a second pot, clippers and some newspaper pages to spread over the work area. You'll also need soil. For the best results, mix bark, wood chips or perlite (a quarter to an eighth of an inch diameter) with an equal amount of peat moss.

1. Remove the mother plant and pup from their container.

2. Gently pull the soil away, exposing the area where the mother plant and pup are joined.

3. The pup may or may not have its own root system. If necessary, pull additional soil away so you have a clear view of the base of both plants.

4. You may not need those clippers after all. Most of the time, the pup can be pulled off the mother plant without the use of any tools. If it resists a firm but gentle tug, make the cut near the base of the mother plant. Replant the mother plant – and only the mother plant – immediately.

5. Before planting the bromeliad pup, let it sit in the shade for at least a day. This allows the area that has been pulled or cut away from the mother plant to callous, preventing soil-borne diseases from entering through the soft tissue. Then you plant the pup using one of the recommended mixtures, and gently press down on the soil around the base of the pup.

6. Care for the young plant just as you would a mature bromeliad.

CULTURE

WATERING - Bromeliads are exceptionally tolerant and even thrive on neglect. But to keep bromeliads healthy and attractive, follow these simple tips on a regular basis. It's best to use purified water, especially for soft-leaf types like Guzmanias. Do not use water from a softener. Let the plants dry out between waterings. It is okay if the soil on the bottom of the pot still is a little damp, but the surface should be dry to the touch. Water the plant by pouring directly into the "cup" or "tank" formed by the center leaves. The tank is an evolutionary adaptation that acts as a reservoir, providing an emergency supply of water and nutrients. Continue pouring after the tank begins to overflow, allowing the excess to spill out and moisten the soil below.

SOIL - For best results, mix peat moss with an equal amount of bark or perlite. Whichever material you choose to mix with the peat moss, it should have a diameter of an eighth to a quarter of an inch.

SUNLIGHT - Direct light on a sunny day is far too intense for most bromeliads, including Aechmeas and Guzmanias, the two most popular types. Direct sunshine can exceed 10,000 foot-candles; the ideal light level for bromeliads is generally around 1,800 foot-candles. If you don't have access to a light meter, simply look for an area that is somewhat shaded and protected from long periods of hot, direct sunlight.

Ideally, the plants should have an abundant amount of filtered sunlight. Because bromeliads are so resilient, they may receive insufficient light for several months and still look great. But eventually the new growth will appear weak or spindly and the foliage may begin to lack color

HUMIDITY - Bromeliads generally grow best in 50 to 70 percent humidity. Since homes in temperate climates usually aren't that humid, it's a good idea to mist the plant once a week or so. In particularly arid climates – and homes where indoor heating systems are being used – it might be advisable to spray or use a misting bottle every third day.

FERTILIZER - A common mistake in caring for bromeliads is to use too much fertilizer or to use it too often. It's usually best to fertilize just once in the spring, twice in the summer and once in the fall, using either a 20-20-20 or 20-10-20 formula mixed at about half the recommended strength. Anything stronger can seriously burn the leaves, and it's best to skip the fertilizer altogether during the dark winter months.

AIR CIRCULATION - Bromeliads love fresh air. In their natural habitats, they can be found thriving in areas prone to strong winds. Fresh air keeps the plant supplied with nitrogen, carbon dioxide, trace elements and moisture. So indoors, it's best to place them near a window or doorway. If that's not practical, put your bromeliad in a shady outdoor area now and then so it can enjoy some fresh air.

TEMPERATURE - Bromeliads flourish at temperatures anywhere between 50 and 90 degrees. They can tolerate dips below and above that range, but not for prolonged periods, so outdoor plants should be moved indoors if the weather turns very cold or very hot and dry.