

Bromeliad: The Other Orchid

Place an orchid in a room and it becomes the focal point. Fascination with this evocative plant has deep roots in its exotic nature, the varied shapes and colors it shows the world, and the mystique of its jungle origins. In the tropical rainforest, growing as a companion to the orchid is another rare beauty, the lesser known but equally captivating bromeliad. Like the orchid, the bromeliad conjures images of tropical forests, where it naturally paints dazzling spots of color and intriguing shapes beneath, inside and on top of the dense jungle canopy.

Like the orchid, bold bromeliad holds its own as a stunning attention-getter. And, unlike the orchid, bring it indoors and it refuses to be pampered, sharing its impressive bloom up to three or four months, with little need for water, fertilizer or special treatment.

Most of us are more familiar with bromeliad's less flashy cousins, the juicy pineapple and air-feeding Spanish moss. With its brilliant colors and enchanting forms, the bromeliad thrives in tropical rainforests, clinging to trees or rocks or nestled on the ground. Many collect water in the cup formed by tight rosettes of leaves (called *tanks*), creating tiny ecosystems for beetles, butterflies, hummingbirds and other creatures of the jungle.

For long-lasting color, the bromeliad is hard to surpass. Its colorful leaf-like centerpiece, made up of tiny buds, or bracts, that are waxy to the touch, can be long or short, flat or rounded, narrow or broad, and ranges in colors from vivid shades of red and orange to soft peach and pink. Its color can last from six weeks to four months, offset by dramatic foliage that can be broad or sword-like or thin and grass-like, smooth or, occasionally, spined. The leaves put on a show of their own show in cool-green, blue-green, striped burgundy and green, speckled or spotted.

Scientists have cataloged more than 3,000 species of bromeliad, and at least one-third, called epiphytic, 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 their tanks. While epiphytic bromeliads make intriguing

counterpoints in the garden, it's the terrestrial varieties that add visual flavor and excitement to home décor. More than 100 bromeliad varieties are available for the home and garden at retail stores.

The five main categories of bromeliad offer hundreds of choices. Probably the most well-known is the popular *Aechmea* group. Pink, salmon or purple flowers emerge from a water cupped formed by upright, spiny leaves. Another fashionable type is *Guzmania*, with its soft, often shiny spineless leaves and tall scene-stealing flowers that bloom in a rainbow of brilliant colors, including yellow, pink, salmon, red, purple and orange. *Aechmea* and *Guzmania* make ideal houseplants, often blooming an impressive 12 to 16 weeks.

Low-growing *Neoreglia* offers color for eight to 12 weeks from its leaves, which create pink, red or purple rosettes when they bloom. The *Tillandsias* group of typically smaller airborne bromeliads has thin, gray-green leaves and exotic, tropical-looking flowers that come in an assortment of colors, including yellow, pink, red and orange and bloom for six to 10 weeks. With soft, upright green or variegated leaves and sword-shaped flowers in red, purple, yellow and orange, *Vriesas* varieties bloom for 8 to 12 weeks.

A naturally hardy tropical plant, bromeliads thrive beautifully as a carefree indoor accent, thriving in low light and able to be shamefully neglected. They love fresh air so, indoors, place them near a window or doorway. Or, simply put them in a shady outdoor area now and then for a dose of fresh air. Bromeliads rarely need to be fertilized, maybe just once in the spring, twice in the summer and once in the fall with about half the formula required by house plants. Skip fertilizing altogether during the winter months.