

Bromeliads

Jennifer Pelham, Urban Horticulture Agent
University of Florida/IFAS Extension in Osceola County

In the spring, one of my favorite types of plant is usually in full bloom - the bromeliad. Bromeliads are low growing, shade loving plants that make excellent landscape plants or houseplants. Many cultivars have vibrant, colorful, long-lasting flowers and brightly colored foliage. They are very drought tolerant and will often grow where other plants will not.

Many bromeliads are epiphytic, which means that they can live on branches and trunks of trees or on rocks in their native habitat and take water and nutrients from the atmosphere. However, most can also be grown in the ground or in containers.

As houseplants, bromeliads will survive for many weeks under very low light conditions. They'll thrive on a porch, near a window or anywhere where they receive bright light, but not direct sun. If light levels are unsatisfactory, a bromeliad will respond. Yellowish or pale green leaves indicate that the light level is too high and dark green, soft, drooping leaves may be signs that light levels are too low. In the home, water once every week or two. It is rarely necessary to fertilize bromeliads when grown as houseplants.

Most bromeliads are tropical or subtropical and thrive outdoors in Florida's warm, humid environment. However, they can be damaged with frost or freezing temperatures. Most bromeliads prefer to be grown in the shade or partial shade, but some will tolerate the full sun. Bromeliads are very drought tolerant and may rot in areas that are too moist.

When growing bromeliads in containers, clay and plastic pots can be used. Because plastic pots retain moisture longer than clay pots, plants grown in the plastic pots need less watering less frequently than those in the clay pots. You can also 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.

Only light applications of fertilizer are necessary during the spring and summer months. A general purpose, water soluble fertilizer can be applied to the soil around the base of the bromeliad 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 or on the leaves, because fertilizer salts could accumulate and burn new leaves.

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 or just let them grow where they are in the landscape. As the older plant dies, it can be easily pulled out of the landscape.

Bromeliads of all shapes, sizes, and colors are available at your local garden center. For more information on bromeliads or answers to your gardening and landscape questions, please contact the Osceola County Master Gardeners at (321) 697-3000. They are available to take your calls Monday thru Friday from 9am to 3pm. You may also stop by the Plant Clinic located in the Extension Services building at Osceola Heritage Park.