

# TILLANDSIA CARE

Tillandsia is the largest genus in the bromeliad family, accounting for approximately 550 of the over 2500 species of bromeliads. Commonly known as airplants, they are found from jungle rain forest to arid desert environments – from sea level to high mountain regions.

Most Tillandsia species use their root systems to attach themselves to trees or rocks and absorb moisture and nutrients through their leaves. This classifies them as epiphytes. Absorption occurs through small scales on their leaves called trichomes. These trichomes are what give many air plants their silver or gray appearance. There is enormous variety in size, shape, texture, bloom and color of these bromeliads. Many of these unique plants undergo a dramatic color change as they prepare to bloom. Some have a very luscious and unequalled fragrance. Since tillandsias are epiphytes, the mounting medium you choose is limited only by your imagination.

These hardy plants are adaptable and tolerant to a wide range of environmental conditions and require minimal care. The three most important requirements are bright light, although not direct sun, good air circulation and water.

**INDOOR / OUTDOOR CARE LIGHT:** If your tillandsias are going to be in your home or office, care must be taken to provide enough light and correct moisture to maintain a healthy plant. A South, East or West window would be best. Bright light or filtered sun is recommended. If these light conditions are not possible, a broad spectrum fluorescent light, such as an aquarium light will provide short term light requirements for your plants. Monthly rotation of indoor plants with those grown in more favorable outdoor conditions allows for continued color and vitality of your tillandsias in the home or office.

Air plants do exceptionally well in outdoor environments. A backyard tree, screened porch or pool patio would be the most likely areas to find the bright filtered-light conditions Tillandsia love. Even though many grow in full sun, as a rule we do not recommend it. Early morning or late afternoon sun should be fine under more humid conditions. In hotter, dryer conditions more shade and water should be provided.

**WATER:** Indoor tillandsias should stay healthy with a watering schedule of 1 to 2 times a week. However, it may be necessary to water more often due to dryer, less humid air caused by air-conditioning or heating. Plants grown in humid outdoor environments should be watered 1 to 2 times weekly. In dryer climates more frequent watering may be necessary. Saturate the bromeliad completely until water runs off the plant – light misting is normally insufficient. Allow to dry completely between waterings. If your plant's leaves start to curl or roll (nature's way of conserving moisture), it could be an indication of dehydration. This can be corrected by completely submerging your plant in water for approximately 15 minutes; then resume normal watering schedule. Softer, greener-leaved plants will require more frequent watering and a bit less sun than gray or silver-leaved plants.

**VENTILATION:** Locate your tillandsias in a well-ventilated area as they love fresh moving air. The movement of air dries plants between waterings which helps to avoid any disease due to overwatering.

**FERTILIZATION:** If you wish to make your plants extra happy you should fertilize about once a month. Because they have the ability to capture and hold nutrients with their trichomes, they have a tendency to be sensitive to overfertilization. Use a good quality liquid or water soluble fertilizer with a formulation low in copper. (High amounts of copper are toxic to bromeliads.) We recommend 10-5-5 plant food. Normally dilute the suggested dosage to 1/4 strength. Fertilizing is not absolutely necessary to survival, but will increase the growth and vigor of your plants and their blooms.

**TEMPERATURE:** Very tolerant of a wide range of temperatures, most species can withstand near freezing temperatures. Although preferring temperatures in the seventies (Fahrenheit), with increased water, air circulation and shade, they can do quite well in temperatures well into the nineties.



**BLOOM:** Tillandsia blooms are as diverse and beautiful as any in the plant world and can last from a few days to as long as a year in some of the slower growing plants. Color can vary from bright yellow, orange, red, pink, blue, purple, white and many shades in between. A wide variety of plants bloom naturally in late winter through mid-summer. Many, but not all, can be forced to bloom using a solution of plant growth regulator sprayed lightly over the entire plant. This treatment will induce the blooming cycle within 4 to 8 weeks. However, many air plants are too sensitive and can be damaged by this process. Or the bloom they may produce is a disappointment compared to the plant's natural blossom.

**REPRODUCTION:** Tillandsia reproduce by offset (pup) or by seed. Many send out pups from the base or between the leaves of the mother plant. This is one characteristic that endears tillandsias to plant enthusiasts. In some plants it is not unusual to see 4 to 8 offsets appear before, during or after bloom. Young plants can be separated from the mother when they are about 1/2 the parent's size, and will mature in about one year. Reproduction by seed is a rewarding process, however growth of a seedling can be very slow, taking years before the young plant is mature.

**MOUNTING:** Since most tillandsias are epiphytic the possibilities of mounting media are almost endless. Some suggestions are driftwood, tree limbs, cork, clay pottery, manzanita burl, rocks or stones of any kind. As tillandsias tend to grow in colonies or clusters of plants, many look very nice just hanging with no mounting at all. Given time an exceptional specimen plant can develop. There are only a few things you must consider carefully when choosing your mounting. Make sure the media you select does not hold water. If a hole is drilled in wood, make sure the it goes all the way through the wood for quick drainage. Accumulated salts in ocean driftwood could burn the plant's leaves. It would be best to soak the driftwood in fresh water for a couple of days before use. Do not use treated wood as most is impregnated with a copper solution to help prevent wood rot. This copper is very toxic to bromeliads.

Several different adhesives are used for securing the plant onto the mount. For example; Liquid Nails, hot glue, Goop, Tilly Tacker or E6000. We recommend E6000 because it is colorless, extremely strong, water proof, and non-toxic to plants. Use a small amount of adhesive near the base of the plant, but not on the bottom. Avoid covering the area where the roots form. Then using a soft coated wire such as telephone wire or floral wire, tie the plant securely until the adhesive sets. With E6000 it will take about 30 minutes to 1 hour depending on the size and weight of the plant.

If you do not wish to use adhesives, plants can be wired without glue. The plant will eventually attach roots which will anchor it to the mount. If the plant has a root system large enough, a heavy staple gun can be used to staple the roots directly to the mount without injury to the tillandsia.

#### **COMMON MISTAKES**

1. Many people do not water often enough. If your tillandsias are not getting water from Mother Nature or humidity is very low, watering one to two times weekly is necessary for healthy, thriving plants.
2. Too little light is a common mistake. If your plants are inside, they need to be near a window to receive adequate light. Remember bright light but not direct sun.
3. Most tillandsias are epiphytes and grow in trees or rocks. Putting them in soil or covering their bases with moss, can keep them too wet and cause them to rot.
4. Too much fertilizer can burn air plants. With most liquid fertilizers 1/4 to 1/2 tsp. per gallon of water applied once a month will keep your bromeliads healthy.

Source: Russell's Bromeliads

