

Tillandsias – Air Plants

Tillandsias are attractive and fascinating members of the pineapple family (Bromeliaceae). Their native habitat is in the southern United States, Mexico and Central and South America. They are found growing on rocks and trees without soil. They receive all of their water and nutrients through the fuzzy gray scales on their leaves called Trichomes. These scales can be quite developed (fuzzy) or microscopic on others (green smooth leaved). Nutrients in nature are provided by dust, decaying leaves and insect matter. Their wire-like roots are void of root hairs and are used for anchoring only.

Tillandsias have a cycle of growth beginning with a single plant which grows to maturity (different sizes for different species). When the plant reaches maturity it blooms in its season, with spikes lasting from several weeks to many months. The color of the bloom depends on the species. When the bloom is finished, new plants (pups, offshoots, babies) grow out of the base of the parent plant. The new plants then grow up around the parent as it slowly dies off with the new plants growing to maturity and completing the bloom cycle in one to several years, depending on the species and culture conditions. When the plant isn't blooming it is growing new plants. Watching these offshoots grow without soil is the real satisfaction in growing Tillandsias and the blooms are the final reward.

Tillandsias can be mounted on shells, burls, rocks, vines, ceramic pieces or almost anything else. Most people use an adhesive to mount small plants. The most common adhesive is hot melt glue or liquid nail. The former must cool 10 seconds or so before placing the plant on the object. Other people use fishing line, florist pink, or thin wire to mount their plants. Experiment using various materials to find what works best for you!

Light

Lighting for Tillandsias should be bright but filtered. They grow best in a greenhouse or a frost-protected, shaded patio. They also can be grown in the house directly in front of an east, west or south window. Fresh moving air is advisable but, remember, the most important care need is bright filtered light. Tillandsias also respond well to artificial light.

Water

Thoroughly wet your Tillandsia 2-3 times per week, more often in a hot, dry environment, less often in a cool, humid one. Plants should be given enough light and air circulation to dry; in no longer than 4 hours.

Spray misting is insufficient as the sole means of watering but may be beneficial between regular watering in dry climates to increase the humidity. If the plant is in a shell be sure to empty the water out of the shell.

Under watering is evidenced by an exaggerating of the natural concave curve of each leaf. It is better to under water than over water.

Fertilizer

Fertilize once a month (March-October) using any high-quality water-soluble fertilizer, ie: 12-12-12. Use 1/4 of what the label recommends and a tablespoon of vitamin B1 per gallon of solution and mix thoroughly. Completely wet leaves with solution.