The Gift of Bromeliads

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An easy- care gift of color

With the Christmas and New Year holidays past, and Valentine's Day approaching, many of us are left wondering how to care for the live plants we have been given, or wondering what type of plant might make a good gift. If you have been given one of the more than 50 million poinsettias sold in the US in December, you have enjoyed the lovely color, not of its flower petals but of its modified leaves called *bracts*.

A bract is a specialized leaf that gives rise to the plant's flower. Usually a bract is small and green and resembles the other leaves, but some very popular garden and houseplants have colorful, showy bracts, thought to attract pollinators.

You may have been the lucky recipient of another, very popular and relatively easy to care for plant with showy bracts, the bromeliad. Bromeliads (*Bromeliaceae*) are members of a large and varied family of flowering plants that includes the pineapple (*Ananus comosus*) and Spanish moss (*Tillandsia usneoidus*), native mainly to the American tropics and sub-tropics.

Sometimes called air plants, most of the houseplant varieties are epiphytes. Epiphytes grow on the trunks or branches of trees and derive nutrients from the air, rain or surrounding debris. They rely on their roots mainly for anchorage rather than feeding.

Both terrestrial and epiphytic bromeliads are highly adaptable and can often thrive equally well in pots, rocky soil or attached to logs or bark. Most are stemless with strap-shaped, arching leaves in a rosette pattern that forms a cup to collect and store water and nutrients.

They are prized for their beautiful foliage as well as their flowers, which can be encased in highly decorative bracts. On others, long spikes push up from the center and are topped by a brightly colored flower head surrounded by showy bracts. These flower heads can remain attractive for weeks, even months. Generally, each rosette of leaves flowers only once and then dies slowly to be replaced by off-shoots or "pups." These off-shoots will replace the mother plant and can be propagated if desired.

Most bromeliads are grown indoors and prefer temperatures no lower than 55 degrees Fahrenheit. Nearly all varieties need high humidity when actively growing. With temperatures over 65 degrees for more than a day or two, mist the foliage daily. An alternative is to set a potted plant in a tray filled with pebbles and a small amount of water (but not reaching the plant

roots). Bromeliads like bright, indirect light with no long periods of direct, hot sun. They need a good amount of light for flowering and "pupping," so place them near, but not in, windows with southern or western exposure.

Water the soil mixture (succulent or orchid mix with excellent drainage, coco coir as an optional additive) no more than once a month, allowing the pot to drain completely. Do not let the plants become soggy or sit in water.

The banded foliage and pink flower of Aechmea fasciata or urn plant. *Photo by Nancy Crowell / WSU Skagit County Extension Master Gardeners.*

With plants that have a rosette cup, keep the cup half-full of water. Drain the cup once a month and refill with fresh water. Water less in cooler, darker months, keeping the cup ¼ full and watering the pot once every two months. High amounts of minerals or salts can damage the plant, so distilled water or rain water is best for the plant cup.

Because they have a small root system, bromeliads may not need to be repotted for 4 or 5 years, and then only into a pot that is 1-2 sizes larger.

Fertilizer is rarely needed, but if used it should not be applied during the winter dormancy period. Use only half-strength liquid fertilizer or orchid food in the spring or summer depending on the plant variety. Some varieties are very sensitive to fertilizer.

To propagate bromeliads, remove the offshoots with a sharp knife after they have grown to a good size and replant them. Remove dead outer leaves. Prune out flower stocks that have died back as well as the mother plant when it has died completely and been replaced by new pups. Some bromeliads can be propagated by seed, but this can be tedious.
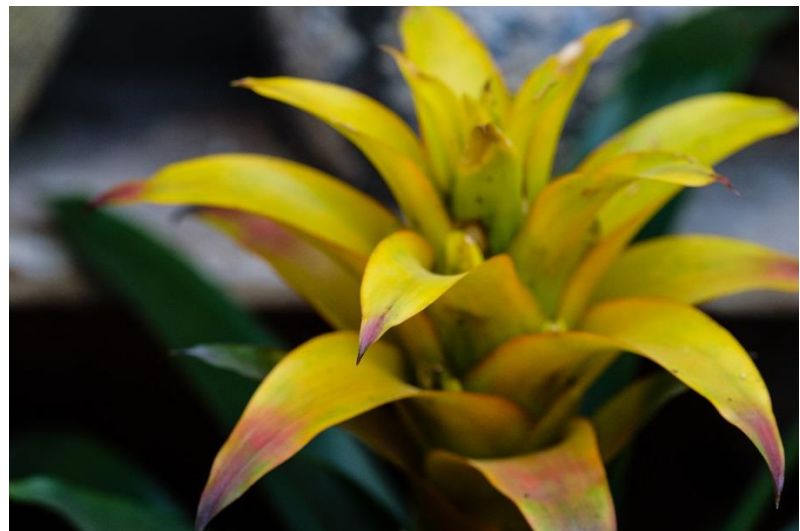
Some of the more popular bromeliads are:

Guzmania lingulata and *Guzmania* hybrids. These have a rosette of soft plain leaves and are mainly prized for their tall flower stalks of crimson, orange or yellow cup- or funnel-shaped bracts. Flowering season is usually late winter.

Vriesa genus (*V. splendens, V. heiroglphica*). Prized for their handsome foliage as much as their showy flower spikes, these bromeliads have smooth-edged, sword-shaped leaves arranged in a loose cup-like rosette reservoir. They do not flower until they are several years old, but the flower spikes and brilliant bracts are long lasting. *V. heiroglphica,* "king of bromeliads" has 20-30 shiny green and purple-striped leaves when mature, spreading to an average of 3 feet, with a 2-foot tall flower stalk.

Aechmea fasciata, or urn plant, has grey-green spiny leaves with crossing white bands and a pink flower stalk up to 6 inches long, lasting up to six months.

Bromeliads are a great, easy care gift of color to give or receive. Their great attraction is their interesting foliage and the emergence of flower stalks of truly fantastic form and color.

Left: Guzmania, a popular winter-flowering bromeliad. **Above:** Guzmania hybrids have several color varieties. *Photos by Nancy Crowell / WSU Skagit County Extension Master Gardeners.*

RESOURCES:

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