

Mysterious Bromeliads *by Honey Sharp*

Did you know that when you open a Dole pineapple can and take a bite of that juicy, yellow fruit floating inside the syrup, you're eating a bromeliad? News to me. My association with the word, bromeliad, was that I could enjoy it in an elegant clay pot—yet another reminder that edibles and ornamentals are intricately related. Perhaps more fascinating still are the geographic, historic and ethnobotanical stories such plants tell as well.

A culinary favorite of the fierce Carib Indians, pineapple also became one of the European nobility. In November 1493, when Christopher Columbus, lowered anchor in a cove off the lush, volcanic island of Guadeloupe, he encountered this curious creature, *Ananas comosus* with its abrasive, segmented pine cone “skin” and its firm interior pulp. It was like no other fruit known in the Old World. Later, it became a fashionable motif of architects, artisans and craftsmen. Think of those gate posts or stenciled dining room walls displaying the exotic fruit.

Recently, I had my own “Columbusesque” experience. Exploring Palenque’s stunning 1200 year old Mayan ruins set in the rain forest of Chiapas, Mexico, I began to notice bromeliads galore. Like the boisterous howler monkeys above us, these epiphytic plants cling to and hang from tree branches. Similar to orchids—also known as “air plants”—they come in all shapes, colors and sizes.

Little did I know though when I was greeted by subzero weather back home that I couldn't get away from these creatures—no, not the howler monkeys but the bromeliads. Dusting off the snow while entering our door, I discovered a rolled up “ball” of rough gray-green moss with pink/red highlights hanging from a hook above my kitchen window. Resembling a rather large sea urchin, I shied from touching it. It turned out to be a Xmas present from a friend who was also nursing my potted plants (including a few very different looking bromeliads). Its label, *Tillandsia ionantha* didn't ring a bell so I just let it hang. I also wondered how to take care of it... Weeks later, I learned it was a bromeliad. It was time to research the “Bromeliaceae” plant family.

Native to the New World, particularly the tropics, the Bromeliaceae family, contains a whopping 3000 species. And these are just the identified ones. Although we are most familiar with the pineapple, another most un-pineapple like one we might brush up against is Spanish Moss. Neither Spanish nor a moss, it, like my suspended ball, also belongs to the *Tillandsia* species and is prolific in the oak forests of the southern United States. And, like orchids, most bromeliads are air plants. In their native habitats, these “soil-less” plants attach by special root structures to trunks and branches of trees. To survive, they derive their moisture and nutrients from the air and rain. This is probably one of the primary reasons why in a cultivated environment they require very little care and are relatively easy to grow. One just needs to respect and attempt to replicate its natural setting.

To confuse things a bit, not all bromeliads however are air plants. Some are “terrestrial” such as the pineapple. Many, such as guzmanias can be grown in pots. “In fact, epiphytic and terrestrial bromeliads can often thrive equally well if forced to switch places and life styles. It is this ability, in particular, that allows many epiphytic species of bromeliads to be grown in pots like most other plants,” according to the University of Florida Extension Service website. (Still, I’m not sure I’d attempt to attach one of my expensive bromeliads to a tree...)

Bromeliads come in a wide range of sizes from tiny miniatures to giants. With their unusual foliage and water-holding rosettes topped by brilliant, long lasting flowers, more specifically, inflorescences, they are highly ornamental. They work well both outdoors when the weather is warm or indoors during frigid winters. In addition, some prefer sun and others shade, particularly those with mottled leaves.

To identify them, look for a central flower spike and strap-shaped, often leathery, arching leaves that come without stems. When not in bloom, their ornamental foliage can be quite stunning, particularly when spotted or striped with amethyst purple tones.

Thanks to the research I subsequently did upon my return from Mexico, I learned more about my *Aechmea* bromeliads I had cherished for months while remaining basically ignorant of their origins and habits. One of the most popular of the bromeliads, they are also called urn or living vase plants. This translates to watering their inner cups and not the light, well-draining soil in which they are planted. They also do fine with little or no fertilizing.

Guzmanias are another genus that is popular. With a similar water-holding rosette, they sport thin, glossy, strap-like and smooth-edged leaves (unlike my *Aechmeas* whose cactus-like leaves I avoid). Clusters of red, white or yellow flowers appear on the orange, yellow or red bracts on a terminal spike.

Centuries after Columbus tasted one, bromeliads have become more widely used as ornamental plants. Originally adopted by royal botanical gardens or the private greenhouses of the wealthy, they are now available at most nurseries, even at Wal-Mart. As new species continue to be discovered in the cloud forest or in the lowland tropics and plant breeders develop ever more stunning hybrids, we’ll be no doubt seeing more. And even though our supermarkets may be selling them, they, like orchids, will never lose their mysterious, tantalizing qualities.

For more information, check Bromeliad Society International <http://www.bsi.org/>
For the history and symbolism of the pineapple, check <http://www.levins.com/pineapple.html>