

Air Plants: Care and Design Made Easy

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# Air Plants: CARE & Design

Made  
Easy

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## Chapter 1

### OPEN IMMEDIATELY:

#### What to do first with your new arrivals.

There is a good chance that you ordered your air plants from the web which means they have been in the dark for a couple of days, so it's important that they ease into their new environment properly. This is the only "handle with care" stage of air plant ownership. Slowly acclimating air plants to the abrupt temperature change (from box to air conditioning or heat) can be made easier with these quick tips.

- When you take them out of the box, do not set them directly in front of a blowing air conditioner, heater or fan and leave them.



#### Instead...

- To lower plant stress, give them a bath for 20-30 minutes. Simply soak them in a bowl of water, neither hot, nor cold, but lukewarm. (Even if they came from the local market, soak them first).
  - Next, lay them out to dry completely.
  - If you are planning on putting them in a glass terrarium, a wall hanging display or any kind of enclosure (or in a hole to stand them up), it is important that you allow them to first dry completely.
- Do not ever plant your air plants in soil – ever, as that would lead to rotting
  - And, do not let them stay wet for long periods of time to avoid rotting.
  - Yes, you may cut the unsightly roots off and peel off the brown leaves. An air plant gathers nutrients through its leaves (or body) and has no use for soil. Roots are nature's way of attaching air plants to their rock or tree host.

These are the immediate steps to take upon arrival of your new plants. There is more to know in order to provide healthy lives for your air plants and their babies (yes babies), like air, light and fertilizer.

BUT DON'T FRET. Once you get the idea that these are not earth bound, root dependent potted plants, you view them with a whole other understanding. And, you will see how easy, independent and carefree these tree dwelling, rock hanging beauties can be.

## Chapter 2

### INTRO TO AIRPLANTS

#### Why air plants are so wonderfully unique

There are many reasons for their uniqueness. Why? If you wanted a lemon tree in your backyard, and you wanted it to survive and produce you have to live in southern California, Mexico, or South Florida. That's not convenient for everyone.

Not with air plants. Once they pass their initial introduction into their new home (about a month) they have much less chance of dying than potted plants. Air plants are extremely adaptable and put up with a much broader range of climate conditions than most plants. In fact they have a temperature range of just above freezing to 100 degrees. Do you think you can keep your house between 50 and 90 degrees? That would be optimum to an air plant.

And since air plants can survive a long time without attention, they make the perfect plant for today's busy and mobile professional. Unlike most plants, you can leave them home alone for a long time without any care. (More about vacation preparation later in our chapter on Care).



“Hearty and Exotic.” These are two words most commonly used when describing the Tillandsia air plants. It is truly a unique and beautiful plant. Most



people own plants that are commonly identifiable in their home because often they don't have the time required to grow exotic potted plants. And what about the greenhouse and specialized fertilizer required to keep rare potted plants?

These exotic Tillandsia plants are so adaptable and so low maintenance that everyone can grow them. Are you getting the idea that these are not your everyday house plants? So, “green thumb” or not, air plants will make you look like a rare, exotic plant grower without the hassle or time consumption of potted plants?

### **So let's recap the uniqueness of air plants:**

- They can live wherever you can live.
- They are low maintenance and can be left for long periods.
- They make you look like an exotic plant grower without the hassle.
- Green thumb or not, once they complete the “adjustment period” into your home or yard and you are clear on what *not to do* to them - air plants will thrive.
- They come in amazing varieties, shapes and sizes.



### **Natural habitats and cultivation of the New World air plant**

The broadest family name for air plants is Bromeliads. This category is shared by the pineapple and the spooky Spanish moss that grows prevalent on the south eastern side of the United States.

The next smaller family (or genus) of air plants is called Tillandsia which has over 600 species and still growing in number due to new discoveries, as well as the creation of new human developed hybrids (the act of combining air plant breeds together to make a new one).



Interestingly, there are still people dressed like Indiana Jones who are combing the far reaches of Central and South America seeking to discover new Tillandsia to introduce to the world.

Yet there is no sad nature conservancy story related to the collection of air plants. They grow in the millions in just a small area of their southern native habitats.

Not all of the 600 plus Tillandsia air plants are easy to maintain and care for like the ones available to

North America now, so your choices are far fewer. On average there are approximately 30-40 air plant varieties available for sale.

Only in the New World

Tillandsias are native to the Americas with the vast majority in Latin America. As you might imagine, these plants are constantly wet in the humid (MESIC) climates - and your imagination would be right!

However, the most hearty air plants and the ones most commonly available for purchase are actually XERIC Tillandsia which instead commonly and naturally endure drought and arid climates. *This is why they are so forgiving of busy people who occasionally neglect their household plants.*

In nature you see XERIC Tillandsia growing on rock cliffs, cactus, and

sometimes the sandy ground. Xeric air plants may flourish in places with drought, but it is also this climate that is responsible for their slow growth and inability to grow to large sizes.



### **Colorful Blooms and Reproduction of “pups”**

Breath-taking colors are really exciting to watch slowly evolve in air plants. Often, if you move them into more light, you can bring out even more dynamic colors and brilliance.

These intense red, orange, purple, and pink color blooms can last around 2-3 weeks while other's in the Tillandsia family last up to 2-3 months. If you own a larger collection of air plants there will always be some in bloom.

### **What to do if no blooming occurs**

In rare cases an indoor air plant will not bloom. If this is the case, after 8 months or a year, then the air plant is calling out for help. Most likely it is not getting enough water/mist or light and is basically not strong enough to bloom. Taking a vacation outdoors (temperatures between 50 and 90 degrees Fahrenheit) is called for until you begin to see it bloom with colors. Then return it to the indoors for a longer lasting blooming period.



So what happens after the blooming season? **Pups!**

Look for tiny air plants at the base or in the center of the flowering. Some will have one pup, but many will have multiple pups.

Most pups will take a year to grow as large as its mother plant, who will have many pups in the course of its 2 year life span - but you can do the math as you go. The plant will multiply during the year with simultaneous blooms in a whole clumping community growing into larger and larger numbers.



### **When to Wean (or separate) the pups**

You can either let your air plants continue growing in an ever bigger clump together or separate one or more pups to start their own families. It is important that you allow the pups to grow to 1/3 or 1/2 the size of the original mother air plant size before removing from the parent plant.

**Here is how to separate:** Grip the base of the mother and the base of the half size pup in separate hands and tug apart with a slight twist. It should be easy to remove. Don't worry, this does not hurt the plants, so there won't be any screaming sounds.☺



Congrat's — It's a Pup!



## **Chapter 3**

### **AIR PLANT CARE (Not much like potted plants)**

Having new air plants in your home is slightly like having a new roommate. You slowly get to know them and their needs as you go. Factors like; the outdoor climate where you live, the home you live in, the use of air conditioning and of ceiling fans, the use of heat and amount of daylight, as well as the proximity

that plants sit from the windows ALL play a factor in the healthy development of air plants.

Picture your Tillandsia growing on a rock wall in the arid Guatemalan Mesa. They deal with drought and occasionally too much rain or sun and yet they are wonderful at adjusting to survive and thrive. Then the little Tillandsia Guatemalan air plant arrives in your home and he doesn't get the sunlight or type of moisture or breeze that he is used to – and yet again he is wonderful at adjusting to thrive and multiply again. Once you learn about watering, sunlight and air, and get to know your new house mates, they will adjust, adapt and thrive.

Your air plants will actually begin to look better and healthier after being in their new home with you a month or so. With normal care, they will actually look better a year after their arrival than they did fresh out of the box on delivery day. All you have to do is get to know what “normal care” is, adjust their care for your homes unique climate and weather and “there you go.”

**There are 4 factors to having a bounty of healthy reproducing air plants –  
water, air, light and fertilizer.**

**Water**

Generally, Tillandsias need to be watered once a week (see vacation watering for longer times). This is done preferably by soaking them (fully submerged) in a bowl of water for 40 minutes to an hour. The most important aspect that people fail to understand is that after they soak, air plants must dry out completely in a dry arid place in the house.

Lay them out on their side so the water drains out of the center. The center of the plant needs to feel dry to the touch after 4 hours of drying. Most often, plants commonly die as a result of water settling in the center of the plant for way too long, thus causing plants to rot and die.

Outdoor air plants can be sprayed with a water hose twice a week for 5-6 minutes and left to dry-out in plenty of daylight.

As mentioned before, Tillandsia take in moisture and nutrients through their leaves, not their roots. Roots are only good for clinging to trees and rocks and for this reason you can cut roots off completely as often as you like. Misting air

plants once a week is helpful but is no substitute for soaking, nor does having a humid climate mean that you need to water less.

If your air plant is boasting a flower bloom, try not to submerge the actual flower (just the body of the plant) or you will lose the joy of its aesthetic appeal prematurely. Soaking in water actually makes the flower drop off.

### **Vacation** Preparation

If you are going to leave home for over 2 weeks, you should soak them in water for 12 hours before you go and then again for 12 hours upon your return.

Another option is to set them out in all day shady area of your yard where the automatic water sprinkler system can water your air plants twice a week.

What kind of water

Rain water made by Mother Nature gives air plants the most nutrients. Use it as often as you can capture it from the outdoors. Otherwise, use spring water because it still has some minerals. Also, use lukewarm water because cold or hot water will shock the plant.

### **Waters To Avoid**

The salt content found in artificially softened water can cause Tillandsia to slowly die. Distilled water is void of needed nutrients and will actually pull nutrients out of the plant tissue causing death. So, it is important to never use distilled water. Too often, tap water has too much chlorine or fluoride in it, which both zap the plant's nutrients as well.

For the alkalinity conscious: Tillandsias generally do better with pH of 5.5-6.0 which is fairly acidic. City water is usually around pH 8.0, therefore it is not ideal to use.

After their bath soak, let them dry out completely before returning them to any kind of enclosure like glass terrariums or even to a small hole or opening of a vase. Let's go over what "dry completely" means again – it means that when you touch them, *you feel no moisture on the body of the plant.*



Your plant will tell you if it is not getting optimum hydration by appearing void of vitality, wrinkled or with curled or brown tipped leaves.

## **Fertilizer**

It is not a necessity to fertilize air plants. If you want to juice them up like a world class athlete, therefore speeding up the reproduction of pups and gaining a more vibrant bloom, then carefully follow these instructions for fertilizing. Most fertilizers on the market are made for soil bound plants, and are not for air plants.

### **If you choose to fertilize:**

- Apply fertilizer during the warm months of reproduction
- Fertilize only once a month.
- Use a good water soluble fertilizer
- Use 1/4 the strength recommended on the label.
- (N) Nitrogen - should be in the form of ammonium or nitrate NOT UREA ( Urea needs the bacteria in soil to break it down).
- (P) Phosphorus and (K) Potassium are important to your air plant health and promote flowering and seed setting.

A highly recommended fertilizer brand is **Epiphytes Delight™** by Rainforest Flora, Inc. It contains the good types of Nitrogen and NONE of the Urea-based nitrogen.

If you use another *non-urea-based fertilizer* for your air plants, make sure you use only 1/4<sup>th</sup> the amount recommended from that stated on the label (for the use of soil plants).

## **Let there be Light without the Sunburn**

Air plants thrive with strong daylight, but not direct sun. If you keep them outside, make sure they are under a shade, with lots of indirect daylight. A brief morning sun or evening sun (1 hour) is fine especially for the northern climates or for the more firm hardy air plants like the Amethyst or Concolor air plants variety.

A good rule of thumb for indoor plants is no more than 10 feet from the window. Right on the window could bake them with the heat and direct sun, so decide

wisely. If you have them in the office, air plants do fine with fluorescent lighting. If your plant needs a bit more you can put it under a desk lamp for more light.

*If your air plant turns much lighter in color it's telling you that it needs more daylight.*

## **Air**

"Air plants" need air circulating not staleness. If you keep them in a terrarium, make sure they have air openings and are not in a place where sunlight could magnify heat with the glass housing. Also, an occasional visit to a shady outdoor place for a day can revive it.



### **Air Plant Care Rules of Thumb and Troubleshooting:**

- The greener, softer leaved plants require less sun and more moisture and thrive in cooler climates.
- The grayer stiffer -leaved plants do better in more light and are from warmer climates.
- Don't water with artificially softened water (too salty)
- Never use distilled water.
- Best to use rain water or spring water (lukewarm temperature.)
- Important to let plants dry out completely before returning them to glass enclosures.
- Air plants need moving air, not closed stale conditions.
- Too much Intense sunlight causes leaves to burn.
- If they turn much lighter in color - they need more daylight.
- Rotting areas on plant (from water settling) need to be removed to prevent spreading of the rot.
- If vacationing for over 2 weeks or two soak plants in water for 12 hours before leaving and again for 12 when you return.
- Dehydration shows on the plant as wrinkled or slightly curled leaves

## Chapter 4

### Design

Because they're so hearty and amazing the design ideas are endless. A suspended air plant is simple and beautiful, but they can also be arranged in any style and in any area there is light. It is so much fun to design with air plants — to bring nature to any space indoors or bring the tropics to any outdoor deck or backyard landscape.

### Mounting Air Plants

There are many options for mounting plants, however, first consider how you are going to water your plant once it is mounted.

If you purchase or assemble your own mounts using waterproof glue that dries clear is a favorite, but any glue is fine other than Superglue. Also good is plumbers glue because it is waterproof and doesn't break down. Using hot glue or liquid nails means you will be re-mounting again in the future because it will be constantly getting wet.



### Good for mounting:

- Waterproof glue
- Plumbers glue
- Goop
- Shoe Goo
- Tilly Tacker
- Fishing line
- Twisty ties
- Nails
- String

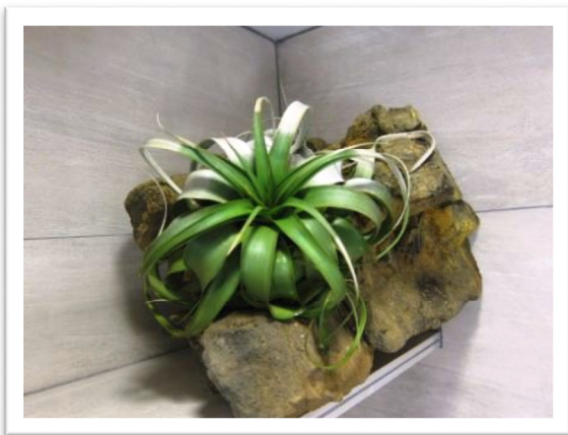
### Not good for mounting:

- Hot glue
- Liquid nails
- Cooper wire (kills plants)
- Do not nail through the plant's body

Only use nails and staples to tie around the plant. Or you may tie the plants roots to the nail. Nailing or stapling through the body of a plant will kill it.

### Indoor Design Ideas

Here are some wonderfully unique ideas brought to you by air plant lovers and designers. You can find inspiration for ideas for displaying air plants in your own home, porch or large landscape project.



Thomas Flushing of New York found a great aquarium rock to pair with a Xerographica. He placed it on a high shelf in his bathroom where it enjoys lots of steam and humidity.

Lisa H. found a beautiful hanging sculpture by a local artist to use in displaying her diverse variety of air plants. They seem to go so well with the uniqueness of this incredible art piece.

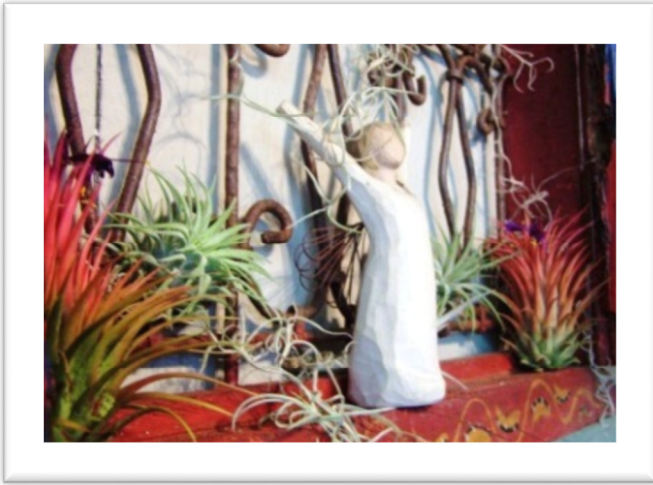


Judy J of Florida used the magically winding Bulbosa air plant to accent her hand blown Murano glass in the dining room. She used a large conch seashell to display her Harrisii air plant with tea and river rocks on a wooden platform in the as well as creating miniature lonantha beach in glass jars for end tables.



candles  
kitchen  
Mexican





Jody shared a window box and a simple red vase and rock

### **Share your designs with others**

If you create your own clever arrangements that excite you to share with other people (who will really appreciate seeing your joyful designs), upload a picture of it on Facebook Fan Pages. This is also a great place to "Like" and receive ideas posted by other creative air plant lovers like yourself.



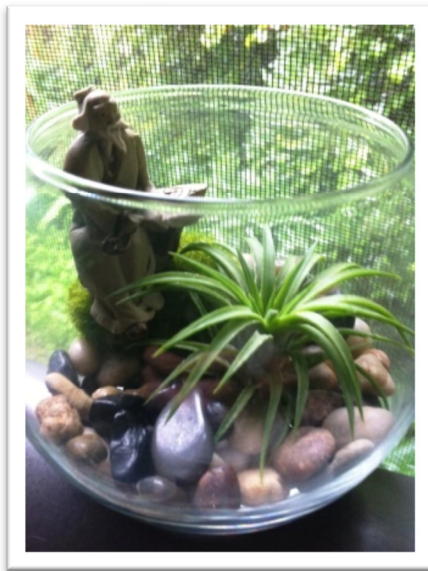
**Ideas for the bathroom**



Mounted on the shower door with natural lighting



**Mounted on natural cork**



In clear glass with river rocks and figurine.

## Outdoor Design Ideas



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