

Bromeliads: long-lasting tropical color

Wonderfully diverse in color, exotic and long-lasting, bromeliads are an excellent, high-dollar alternative for containers and landscapes.

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- Rick Schoellhorn

January is the month of the TPIE (Tropical Plant Industry Exhibition) conference and trade show in Fort Lauderdale, Fla. This is a major exposition for tropical foliage and color and a great place to see not only what is being produced in the South but also tropical product from Europe, Latin America and the Caribbean. As I attended the show this year, I was thinking that many growers and retailers may be looking for crops to help them establish a reputation for diversity, and that this show is a great place to start. It is also a great location to escape the Northern winter for a week of trade shows and nursery tours.

With the continuing popularity of the tropical look in gardening there is a lot of great material to look at, and though most of the tropical materials can be ordered in as liners and finished locally, some of the slower-growing crops may require Northern nurseries to buy in pre-finished or finished material to expand their offerings of tropical plant material. Two of the most popular plants that fit this type of crop include orchids and bromeliads. The boom in orchids as flowering potted plants (now listed as the number-two flowering potted plant, just behind poinsettias) and the growing diversity of bromeliad hybrids on the market make it much easier to find reliable sources for some really exotic color.

I will look more at orchids sometime in the near future, but for this month I wanted to talk about bromeliads and some of the spectacular, long-lasting hybrids coming on the market. Especially during the long, cold months of winter, bromeliads can offer intense color that lasts from six weeks to three months depending on our nursery conditions and the hybrid selected. Interiorscapers have known about the advantages of this hardy group of plants for years, but bromeliads are often overlooked as plants to be used in the color market and even have a place in the summer shade color market nationwide. The majority of the pictures this month came from the booth of Bullis Bromeliads, Princeton, Fla. Bullis supplies finished product nationally and internationally and breeds many of its own hybrids.

Bromeliad background

A little background on bromeliads: In their native environment, this group of plants is mostly known as epiphytes, meaning that while they live in the branches of tropical trees,

or cling to the sheer cliff faces of their home countries, they do not harm the trees they exist on. Instead, they use the trees for support to hold the plants above the canopy where the best light and rainfall can be found. While not all bromeliads live in the trees, they are known for their ability to withstand dry conditions, low light levels and low fertility. Because they can tolerate these conditions, they make excellent interior plants and provide incredibly long-lived outdoor color as well. A word of caution: A lot of people get the idea that bromeliads are like cacti and prefer to be dry and exposed to high light levels; this is a common error and one you need to avoid if you are going to be growing or using these plants in your crop selection. While there are a few bromeliads with the same requirements as cacti, most of the more colorful types prefer shade, moisture and warm temperature to look their best and last the longest. Sun scald on bromeliads will immediately render them unsalable; be conservative and treat bromeliads to the same light levels you use on your tropical foliage plant materials.

When ordering pre-finished bromeliads, remember that while the flower spikes may last up to three months, once the plant or "vase" that makes up the center of the pot finishes flowering, that vase will die and "pups," or offshoots, will branch out from the base of the plant. It may never be the same quality again but can continue to provide color or foliage for years to come. Because of this growth habit, it is very important to take good care of that flower spike to maximize the shelf life of the bromeliads. Another note: Most bromeliads can be induced to flower with small doses (25-100 ppm) of ethylene, either in gas form or at low concentrations of liquid sprays. While the homeowner may place a slice of apple in the vase, commercial growers can purchase packets that release the chemical slowly to induce even flowering.

Cultivars

Neoregelia. Not all flowering bromeliads form a flower spike in the center of the plant. The *Neoregelia* genus forms a symmetrical vase of foliage, but flowers form in the center of the vase and do not elongate past the top of the foliage. For this reason *Neoregelia* hybrids offer excellent foliage color and are very long-lasting in the landscape, color bowl or interiorscape. Try mixing three different 5- to 6-inch *Neoregelia* pots into a wicker basket and you have an instant color bowl that will last all summer on a shady patio ? and will be a value-added item as well.

Aechmea. In the flower-spike-types of bromeliads there are lots of choices to make as well. *Aechmea* hybrids have long been a staple of the interiorscape industry. This genus can handle higher light levels and drier conditions quite well. The old standard was *Aechmea fasciata* with silver foliage and pink-bracted spikes with red and royal blue flowers, but there are now a lot of other colors and forms to choose from. 'Patricia' has green foliage with purple tones and bright pink and yellow bracts. *Aechmea* 'Flamingo' was also striking with silver foliage, pink- to lavender-toned bracts and yellow flowers. The real show-stopper at TPIE, however, was *Aechmea* 'Blue Tango', with brilliant blue and red-cerise spikes on plants just shy of three feet tall, with green, thornless foliage. Not all *Aechmea* hybrids have been "declawed," or bred to have thornless leaves, so ask when purchasing plants. I have a family video of my son learning to walk and stumbling

into a display of thorned bromeliads, and well? let's just say it ends badly and move on. Thornless is a plus in many situations, so consider what you need when ordering.

Guzmania. The *Guzmania* genus has thornless foliage in green to purple/burgundy tones and brilliantly colored bracts of red, orange, yellow and bi-colors on the spikes. These hybrids easily last eight weeks in flower and longer under the right conditions. Avoid chilling to keep plants looking their best. There are quite a few hybrids, so when ordering, look for mature size and bract color to get what you are looking for.

Ananas. *Ananas* is the genus we get the edible pineapple from. Some of the old-fashioned forms are wickedly thorned, so do be careful to get thornless varieties where possible. There are two really nice options here that I saw in Fort Lauderdale. The first is the thornless *Ananas comosus* 'albo-marginatus' from Bullis Bromeliads, a striking, variegated foliage form with pink fruit. A really sturdy plant with long-lasting interest, the fruit that form on ornamental pineapples may last a year or more.

That long-lasting quality is what brings us to the second *Ananas* I wanted to talk about. *Ananas lucidus* was on display at ForemostCo's booth and the main production of this crop is with 1 1/2-inch pots, pre-initiated so the plant quickly forms a miniature spike complete with fruit! There are a few different suppliers, but plants are sold both as liner plantlets and as cut flowers. The spike with fruit is also very long-lasting in a vase and adds a tropical look to larger arrangements.

Tillandsia. The *Tillandsia* genus is known as "air plants," and most have greenish-gray foliage and are less-striking, but there are some very sculpted-looking forms available. Flowers are not usually as significant as some of the more colorful genera, but for understated form and a Mediterranean effect, look into this group. *Tillandsia xerographica* is a great example, but there are many more that are also long-lasting and attractive.

Specimen forms. The giant vases of *Alcantarea imperialis* and other specimen forms of bromeliads can be signature items for any retail outlet or landscape. Many of the larger forms can be up to four feet in diameter, with multi-hued foliage and spikes of colorful flowers as well.

An easy, high-value plant

This is only an introduction to the group of plants known as bromeliads, and as such, barely scratches the surface of what is available ? check some of the sources listed in the sidebar to the right and explore a bit. At the university we are looking at landscape uses of these wonderful plants and have found quite a few (Mostly *Billbergia* and *Neoregelia* hybrids) that are hardy in temperatures as low as 19° F, tolerate dry shade and require minimal irrigation. So Southern growers may want to look at some of the hardier types for potential landscape use. Either way, throughout the United States, the potential for bromeliads as high-dollar bedding plants is pretty much untapped.

With increasing tissue culture production, improvements in shipping and lower prices than in the past, bromeliads are definitely more of an option and a great way to set your production apart from less-specialized operations. The plants are extremely colorful and long-lasting, and as long as temperatures and light levels are kept within reasonable set points, they are pretty much idiot-proof when you order pre-finished materials.

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