



BILLBERGIA

Billbergia is a genus of the subfamily Bromelioideae. The genus, named for the Swedish botanist, zoologist, and anatomist, Gustaf Johan Billberg, is divided into two subgenera: Billbergia and Helicodea. They are native to forest and scrub, up to an altitude of 1700 meters. Billbergias are found in southern Mexico, the West Indies, Central America and South America, with many species endemic to Brazil. The leaves are considerably longer than their width and usually form an upright cylindrical tube shape, which holds water at the bottom. They are typically epiphytic and are known for their brilliantly colored bracts and flowers. There are currently 63 accepted species, a fairly small number, but there are nearly 1,300 registered hybrids and cultivars and probably 10 times as many not even named.

Those from subgenus Helicodea are known as ‘the watch spring’ Billbergias because the flower petals curl backwards. They tend to grow very tall and have inflorescences that usually hang down further than the height of the plant. When growing in trees in Nature, this trait places the flowers hanging in open air where hummingbirds can easily reach them. In cultivation, it means they need to be placed on a stand or a tall over-turned flower pot when they bloom, or the beautiful inflorescence will be on the ground. Billbergias from subgenus Helicodea are among the least cold hardy of bromeliads. They are best brought indoors when a freeze threatens.

The subgenus Billbergia species are the ones most frequently grown. All around Central Florida the bright red blooms of *Billbergia pyramidalis*, often called ‘the hurricane flower’ or ‘torch flower’, are seen in bloom in late Summer and early Fall planted around the bases of oak trees. However, most Billbergias bloom during the cooler months from November through mid-Spring. They should be protected from freezing, but many clumps grown outdoors in Central Florida make it through normal winters with little damage. Although hard freezes may kill back a clump, often the base of the plants survives to produce pups by the following Summer.

The gorgeous flowers of the Billbergias are often compared to the beauty of orchids, but they are not long lasting. Typically, they last only a couple of weeks from first rising out of the center of the tube of leaves until becoming dried out and brown. However, over the past 20 years there have been many hybrids created with colorful foliage with spots and splotches of white and shades of pink, rose and purple. These are much desired for the colorful foliage and sculptural shapes. The beautiful bloom is a bonus.

Billbergias do well in a standard, fast-draining bromeliad potting mix. One of the standard recipes in use by many growers is a mix of equal parts of (1) mulch/pine bark nuggets, (2) perlite and (3) a professional soil-less potting mix. Some growers use equal parts of pine bark mixed cypress mulch and peat moss. Orchid-type potting mixes do well also. The goal is to have a mix that is easily moistened, but drains well. Avoid heavy soils and any mix the remains soggy wet.

Billbergias seem to grow best when “under-potted”. They like being a bit crowded. They should be only lightly fertilized, if at all. They do not need any fertilizer if grown outdoors where leaves and such get caught in their leaves. When grown in pots, a little fertilizer can be beneficial. Sprinkle a little time-release fertilizer on the surface of the potting mix, but just a little. Use no more than half of the label recommendation, or even less. Or, you can use a liquid fertilizer spray mixed at one-half to one-quarter strength and sprayed very lightly on the foliage. Fertilizing a few times during the year is plenty. Too much fertilizer makes the plants lose their shape and color. The leaves become plain green and overly long and weak. Some growers have observed that once fertilized heavily, it can take a couple of generations for the Billbergias to regain the colorful foliage and sculptural shape. They are that efficient in using and storing all the nutrition that comes their way. When in doubt, do not fertilize.

Billbergias will do acceptably in moderate shade, but for full color in the foliage they need filtered sun. Some early morning sun helps bring out the color. Be careful of direct sun the rest of the day, especially when the weather is warm. They will burn in direct sun during Florida’s long, hot summers. If you would get a sunburn, it is probably too much for your Billbergia. If a plant is being grown in too little light, it will turn greener and its leaves will start becoming overly long. Move it to a brighter area. When a plant needs to move to a brighter location, make the move gradually. Unlike ordinary garden plants, bromeliads need time to acclimate to increased light without burning. If there is too much light, the leaves start yellowing or “bleaching”.

Watering is easy. Keep water in the center cup and moisten the potting mix whenever it gets dry. Let the potting mix get fairly dry between waterings. Soggy soil is to be avoided. When in doubt, water the center and let the pot go dry.