



ALCANTAREA

The genus *Alcantarea* is in the subfamily *Tillandsiodeae*. It is named for Dom Pedro d'Alcântara, the second Emperor of Brazil. All of the species are endemic to eastern Brazil. Long considered a group within the genus *Vriesea*, the *Alcantarea* was established as a separate genus in 1995, but sometimes plants will be found still labeled as *Vriesea*. There are 47 recognized species and 68 registered cultivars. There are more un-registered cultivars. The genus is composed of extremely large tank-forming bromeliads, some reaching 5 feet or more across. The bloom spike of some can rise to over 10 feet. In their natural habitat they are often found perched high up on rocky hillsides and cliffs. For centuries, these giant bromeliads have been of great interest to botanists, naturalists and collectors. Beyond their contribution to horticulture, the *Alcantarea* are important to the ecosystems of their habitats. They keep a large volume of water in the reservoir formed by their leaves, which serves to supply the needs of all sorts of creatures who would otherwise have great difficulty surviving in the dry environments where *Alcantarea* thrive.

Alcantarea imperialis is perhaps the largest and best-known species. The most common form has medium green foliage blushed with shades of wine-red and purple, and overlaid with a silvery wash. The undersides of the leaves are more red. There are different cultivars that are redder, or more purplish or more silvery. All grow to nearly six feet in diameter. It may take many years for one to reach maturity and bloom, but it puts on a real show when it does. The branched bloom spike rises to 10-feet or more, with reddish bracts and large cream-white flowers that attract hummingbirds and other pollinators. It can take three or more months for the rising bloom stalk to reach the point when flowers begin to open and then continue flowering for another four months. Other popular species include *vinicolor* for its dramatically red foliage and more moderate size; *odorata* for silvery foliage about a meter across and yellow flowers; and *glaziouana* for its silver-barréd green foliage and white flowers.

Alcantarea are happy with cool weather as long as protected from frost or a hard freeze. The most significant challenge in growing them is their size. If grown in a pot, the pot must be quite large to support a mature plant without falling over. If grown in the ground, providing protection during a hard freeze can be problematical. *Alcantarea* should be grown in a very well-drained area of the garden, or use a free draining potting mix. The best foliage color and growth is achieved with direct sun for at least part of the day. In central Florida, some growers recommend full direct sun all day; and others recommend some protection from hot afternoon sun during summer. When acquiring one you have not grown, ask about the sun exposure in which the plant has been grown. Many young plants are grown in filtered light until fully established and may be burned if exposed to full sun immediately. Gradually acclimate the plant to increased sun exposure. *Alcantarea* appreciate being watered, but can withstand long periods without as long as there is water in the center. When grown outdoors where the plant will capture fallen tree leaves and such in its leaves, it is not necessary to fertilize. However, *Alcantarea* respond well to a light spray of liquid fertilizer regularly applied. As with most bromeliads, use a half-strength solution and do not pour the fertilizer solution into the center of the plant. A little goes a long way, and extra can cause damage.

Some *Alcantarea* produce pups like other bromeliads. These can be separated readily and potted to be grown on their own. Some, like *A. imperialis*, produce small grassy offsets at the base when young, but no large pups. Growing the grassy offsets can be challenging. Care has to be exercised to remove them without injury. Even then, often only a low percentage take root on their own. One technique that has worked for some hobbyists is to place the removed grassy offsets in the water held in the leaves of the parent plant until they have grown extensive roots. This can take several months. Then they are potted up on their own.

With *Alcantarea*, one thing is certain. Visitors will exclaim, "That huge plant is a bromeliad?!"