



TILLANDSIA

Tillandsia is the genus of the “air plants”. Spanish Moss (*Tillandsia usneoides*) and Ball Moss (*T. recurvata*) thrive throughout Central Florida. You are likely growing Tillandsia in your garden, up in the trees, without even trying. There are currently over 700 accepted species and more than 1,500 registered hybrids and cultivars. There are thousands more that are not officially registered. Although some are very similar to Vrieseas, it is the “air plant” group of Tillandsias that are most popular.

Tillandsia is the largest genus in Bromeliaceae and it has the widest geographic and habitat distribution. They are to be found in the forests, mountains, swamps and deserts of northern Mexico and the southeastern United States throughout the Americas to Argentina. Tillandsias are arguably the most highly evolved of all bromeliads. Many of them have adapted to living off the moisture and nutrients borne in the air. However, while they can survive with virtually no care, they are very slow to develop and bloom without a helping hand.

Air movement is as important to growing Tillandsias as light and water. They are best grown hanging in the air from an overhang, a tree branch or a nail in a post. Anyplace with good air movement and light is satisfactory. Growers create walls of them by hanging them on fences or from wire grids. They can be mounted on all sorts of bark, branches or wood plaques (but not treated lumber). Large ones are often grown in orchid baskets or similarly open containers. Many do not need to be mounted at all. They will do well simply wired to a hook.

All Tillandsias will do well in moderately bright filtered light and dappled sun. In these conditions, it is sufficient for them to be watered once a week or so. If placed where it rains on them, extra water is needed only during the dry months of the year. The more silvery the Tillandsia, the more light it can receive. Most can be grown in full sun, especially during Central Florida’s cooler months. In a sunny spot, the silvery ones often develop purplish or reddish color tones in the leaves. However, with exposure to direct sun it is important to pay extra attention to regular watering. If the ends of the leaves of a growing plant begin to shrivel and dieback, the plant should receive more frequent watering or be moved to lower light exposure. Any plant moved from shade to direct sun should be acclimated gradually. When it comes to watering Tillandsias, hold off until the plant is dry. When they dry off between waterings there is much less chance of rot taking hold. When in doubt, wait a day before watering.

Tillandsias can be very slow growing. They respond well to a little fertilizer. Spray lightly with a liquid fertilizer. Use 1/2 to 1/4 of the recommended strength and spray the foliage lightly. There is no benefit to drenching the plant. Tillandsias are extremely efficient at using all available nutrient. More than a light spray risks injuring them. Once every month or two is sufficient. Fertilizers designed for orchids generally have the ingredients best suited to the needs of Tillandsias, but any liquid fertilizer is adequate.