



## AECHMEA

Aechmea (eek-may-a) is a genus of the subfamily Bromelioideae. The name comes from the Greek word aichme (a spear point), because many have long primary bracts that end in a pointed tip. Aechmea is a very diverse genus with a wide range of foliage types and inflorescence forms. Even the overall shapes vary, with some species forming open rosettes, and others being like small-mouthed bottles, with everything in-between. Some are small, just inches across and only a few inches tall. Others are over a meter across and can be over 4-feet tall when in bloom.

Aechmea has eight subgenera, with species distributed all across Mexico and throughout South America. Most of the species are epiphytes, growing up in trees, but some are terrestrial and lithophytes (rock dwellers). There are currently 243 accepted species, with many having multiple forms. There are also nearly 900 registered hybrids and cultivars. The nearly infinite variety of foliage and bloom has made Aechmea one of the most popular group of bromeliads.

Nearly all Aechmea have very long-lasting inflorescences that remain attractive long after flowering is done. Often the flowers are followed by colorful berries that last for a month or longer. Sometimes people miss out on the berries because they cut off the bloom spike as soon as it loses color. The berries are edible, but you'll not want to miss out on their attractive looks. If you are not familiar with how yours grows, do not be too quick to remove the spike. In a few weeks you may have color again.

Nearly all Aechmea 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 that remains soggy wet. If your Aechmea is one that grows large, you will need a large pot so it does not fall over in every breeze that comes along. It can also be helpful to place a few rocks in the pot to help anchor a large plant.

Aechmeas also do well when mounted, but it is best to start with young plants before they get heavy. Plants mounted on trees or palms can pretty much take care of themselves except during a freeze.

Aechmeas should be only lightly fertilized. They do not need any fertilizer if grown outdoors where leaves and such get caught in their leaves. If you keep the leaves washed out, a little fertilizer can be beneficial. Some growers 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. You can always sprinkle a little more, but it is harder to remove if you applied too much. Others prefer to use a liquid fertilizer spray mixed at one-half to one-quarter strength and sprayed lightly on the foliage. There is no need to wet all the leaves and do not pour the fertilizer water into the center cup. Fertilizing every couple of months is sufficient. Too much fertilizer makes the plants lose their shape, with leaves becoming excessively long and weak.

Nearly all Aechmea will do well in filtered sun. Ones with softer, flexible leaves, like *Aechmea fasciata* and *A. fulgens*, generally do best in about 60-70% shade. Those with hard, cardboard-like leaves, such as *A. chantinii* and *A. nudicaulis*, enjoy more light, in the 45-60% shade. All will do well with early morning sun, but even the those that like brighter light will burn in direct sun during Florida's long, hot summers. If you would get a sunburn, it is probably too much for your Aechmea. If a plant is being grown in too little light, it will turn greener and its leaves will start becoming overly long. Those are signs that it needs to be moved to a brighter area. The plant will respond by regaining a compact shape. If there is too much light, the leaves start yellowing or "bleaching". If brown, sunburnt spots appear, it needs to be moved right away to a lower light spot. 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.

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.