

# *Tropiflora's* Creating A Bromeliad Tree

## Replicating Nature in Your Garden

Bromeliads are unique in that there are so many ways to enjoy them. Many bromeliads make superb house plants with long lasting blooms and ease of care. Landscapes in sufficiently warm climates can be enhanced by the addition of bromeliads for accent or even as the main feature of your outdoor garden. Bromeliads lend themselves to culture in places that are difficult to fill with 'ordinary' plants. Many are tolerant of drought, shade and sun. Perhaps most uniquely, bromeliads can grow as epiphytes in trees, on driftwood or on rocks, adding a dimension to your landscape that is beyond the reach of most other plants. There is no better way to display bromeliads than to create a 'bromeliad tree' to bring color to almost anyplace where a bold statement is required.

Bromeliad trees can be made from any kind of natural wood as long as it has not been painted or pressure treated. Driftwood is ideal and free standing pieces can be found to make a natural looking mount. For portability or for wood that will not stand alone, setting your wood into a container partially filled with cement is an excellent way to create a stunning and useful display.

### STEP BY STEP INSTRUCTIONS FOR MAKING A BROMELIAD TREE

(Instructions refer to making a container-type tree stand. For free standing wood, skip all container steps.)

**Choosing Wood for Tree** Choose a piece of wood that is of the right size for your project and is sound. Check for termites and rot. Choose wood that is naturally hard and rot resistant. Pine should be avoided in favor of rot resistant woods such as cedar and cypress. Some natural character is nice, but even a simple piece of wood makes an interesting bromeliad tree.

#### Container for Stand

The pot you choose should be large enough to hold the entire mounting upright, once all plants are attached. A 10 to 14 inch pot is typical, but a larger one may be needed for very large or asymmetrical pieces of wood. Plastic pots are best, as they can be drilled and worked much easier than clay or other materials. Other types of containers can also be used, as long as holes can be drilled in them for drainage.

#### Preparing the Wood

After choosing a suitable piece of wood for your mounting, drive several spikes half way into the wood, a few inches above the bottom end. These will help to hold the concrete to the wood. Treating the part of the wood that will be set in the concrete with asphalt or wood preservative can extend the life of the mount.

#### Preparing the Container

Choose a suitable container for the base. When one is chosen, prepare it by taping over the drain holes, on the inside. Near the outer edges of the pot bottom, preferably in a depression so they won't scratch the floor, insert several screws (any type, about 2in long) into the pot bottom. When the concrete is poured, these will help to anchor the pot to the cement and avoid having it fall off when being moved. These do not screw into the wood, but only into the empty pot.

#### Setting the Tree in its Base

Mix your sack concrete mix to a thick consistency and after placing the wood stand into the base, pour the mix into the pot, to within about 3 or four inches of the top of the pot. Prop the wood against an object to hold it in the desired position until it sets, at least 24 hours. After the concrete sets, drill some small drain holes through the side of the pot from the inside out, right at the level of the concrete. Space holes about every 3 or 4 inches and use a 3/8 inch or similar drill bit.

#### Choosing and Preparing the Plants to Mount

Next, taking into account the size and shape of the wood, the location where you plan to keep the finished piece and your personal taste, choose bromeliads to place on the tree. If the area where you plan to keep the finished product has bright light but not direct sun, you have many, many options. Avoid terrestrial species such as *Cryptanthus*, except for planting in the base.

After the plants are chosen, remove all soil and roots from those you plan to mount on the tree. Wash all soil residue from the base of the plants, then set them aside and allow to dry thoroughly.

### Bromeliads to Avoid Mounting

Terrestrial bromeliad species such as *Ananas* (pineapple), *Dyckias*, *Hechtias*, *Cryptanthus*, *Pitcairnia* and others should never be mounted. Soft leaved varieties such as *Guzmanias* may not hold up as well as others and should be avoided for most projects.

### Bromeliads Best for Mounting

These plants would include any of the hundreds of 'facultative epiphytes' or bromeliads suited to potting or mounting, like most *Neoregelias*, *Billbergias*, *Aechmeas*, *Quesnelias* and others. Or, any of the vast number of *Tillandsias*, which as xerophytes, will thrive under the conditions found on a bromeliad tree.

### Bromeliads for Special Conditions

Some bromeliads, though facultative epiphytes, are very mesic (water requiring) and should be carefully considered before using them. Bromeliads such as *Guzmania* and *Vriesea*, though they are quite beautiful and certainly would grow on a bromeliad tree, require much more water than other bromeliad genera. Should you have a greenhouse or other humid or moist location, out of the wind and sun, then these bromeliads are worth considering. However, mixing them with some of the more hardy varieties may mean that one plant or the other may not be in ideal conditions, receiving too much or too little water.

**Other Epiphytic Plants** may be added to your tree, such as orchids or *Anthuriums*, *Dischidias* or others, and doing so may require some different mounting techniques. For the purposes of this tip sheet, however, we will limit our instructions to the use of bromeliads only.

### Mounting the Bromeliads on the Wood

By now you should have a design in mind and the next step is to attach the plants to the tree. Choose a plant that will be in a key location, and hold it up to the attachment point on the wood. When you have found the right spot for it, with the stem or stolon in contact with the wood, mark the spot for placement of attachment wires. There should be at least two attachments if possible, which should be easy as long as you have at least  $\frac{3}{4}$  inch of stem to work with. Cut a short length of wire, sufficient to go around the stem of the bromeliad and to twist together. We recommend a galvanized wire at least 17 gauge. Aluminum is generally soft and easily broken, and bare copper wire is toxic to bromeliads. Staple the short lengths of wire where you have made your marks, using double pointed tacks or other suitable small staples. Keep in mind that the staples will eventually be holding the entire weight of the plant.

**A reminder: Be sure the plants are cleaned and well dried before taking the next steps!**

After placing the wires on the wood, apply a generous pad of adhesive over the area where the plant will contact the wood. We use and recommend construction adhesive, like Liquid Nails. Next, place the plant against the wood and adhesive, and pass the wires around the stem. Making sure this is where you really want the plant to remain and that it is oriented correctly, twist the wires snugly tight with a pair of pliers. Trim off the excess wire and go on to the next plant.

**Note: We do not recommend putting moss or any other media between the plant and the wood.**

When all plants have been suitably attached, your tree is almost finished. If the bases of the bromeliads are visible and the wire attachments exposed, you can remedy the situation in several ways. First, you can simply apply a little adhesive (dab it on with your finger) to the surface of the base and attach some fibrous material such as sphagnum to disguise the attachment points. Be sure to wear plastic gloves or put your hand into a plastic bag to avoid getting the adhesive on them. Another method is to place other small bromeliads in such a manner that they obscure the bases of the first plants. Many *Tillandsia* species are suitable for this purpose.

### Planting the Base

The remaining step to finish your tree is to plant something in the base. Depending upon your tastes, you may choose to plant similar bromeliads to those you have mounted, some unrelated terrestrial plants, or nothing at all. If you plant the base, you may remove the chosen plants from their pots and place them directly into the cavity remaining in the base in such a way as to have the desired effect. Fill in the voids with suitable potting soil and leave about the last inch for applying a layer of mulch. Bark mulch, chips or pebbles work well for this purpose. Alternately, the cement-filled base may be buried in the ground to support the tree or set into a larger, decorative container.

**Now, stand back and admire your work! Trim any brown leaf tips or spruce up any area that you deem in need of attention, then quit for the day. Wait at least overnight before watering the tree to allow any adhesive to completely cure.**

## Care of Your Bromeliad Tree

Several factors should be considered regarding the care of your bromeliad tree.

**Location.** Your bromeliad tree should be kept in a place where light is adequate, but out of direct sun. Some early morning and late afternoon sun is okay, but midday sun should be avoided. The best light would be considered 'bright indirect light'. A maximum constant light would equal that received through a pool screen. Lower light will suffice, as long as the plants retain their shape and color.

**Indoors or out?** Your bromeliad tree will thrive outdoors, as long as the temperature remains within an acceptable range: Best between 50 and 90 degrees Fahrenheit. Temperatures colder than the low 40's should be avoided. Indoors it will require bright light, near a window and adequate humidity.

**Ambient moisture.** If kept outdoors, your bromeliad tree will receive moisture from rain and perhaps dew, lessening the necessity to hand water. During seasons of frequent rainfall, this may be sufficient to sustain the plants on your tree. However, during seasons of little rainfall, or if your tree is kept under a roof, you will need to water it. Watering can be done in any fashion that will wet the entire plant and mounting substrate. When possible, use a hose or pitcher to drench your plants, wetting all surfaces thoroughly. Plants such as *Tillandsias* with silvery leaves, require less water than large, wide leaved, water holding plants such as *Neoregelias* and *Aechmeas*. Plants should be allowed to dry between watering and a rule of thumb might be to water two to three times per week, although your local climate may dictate a more frequent schedule.

**Feeding.** To thrive, your bromeliad tree will need to be fertilized on a regular basis. As most of the plants will be growing epiphytically, they will not have soil to retain moisture and nutrients. Foliar feeding will be the only viable method of getting nutrients to the plants on your tree. Use a soluble fertilizer, such as Peter's or any similar brand (we recommend an NPK ratio of 20-10-20). The strength of the application is determined by the frequency. Apply the fertilizer at label rates if you fertilize monthly, at half the label recommended strength if you fertilize biweekly, and so on. The fertilizer solution can be applied by drenching or including it with the water during irrigation.

**Keep it looking good.** Your bromeliad tree will need very little in the way of maintenance, save for the occasional grooming. All plants, bromeliads included, shed older leaves from time to time. These leaves, if unsightly, should be removed or trimmed so as to keep the display looking fresh. When bromeliads bloom, they will produce a flush of offsets that will attach readily to the substrate. In time, the original plant will begin to fade. If the offsets are of sufficient size, about 1/3 the size of the original, the original plant can be cut away if it is becoming unsightly. In many cases, this will not ever be necessary.

**With a little care and attention to details, your bromeliad tree can bring you years of satisfaction.**

**Changing over time as the plants bloom and increase it will add beauty to your garden, patio or plant room and solicit many admiring comments from your friends and family.**

### Materials Needed For A Bromeliad Tree

Suitable piece of driftwood  
Plastic pot to create stand, sized to hold wood upright  
Tape for holes in pot  
4 screws to hold pot to concrete  
Several 16 penny nails  
Bag of cement mix with small gravel  
17 gauge galvanized wire for attaching plants  
Telephone wire for attaching plants  
Mulch for the top of the pot  
Small staples for attaching wire  
Tube of Liquid Nails

Bromeliads to mount  
Bromeliads for base  
Extra potting soil

### Tools Needed For A Bromeliad Tree

Bucket to mix cement in  
Hammer  
Drill with 3/8 inch bit  
Pliers with side cutters  
Pair of dikes (side cutters)  
Pencil  
Plant clippers  
Scissors

**See these other Tropiflora care sheets for further information on bromeliad culture:**

'General Bromeliad Care', 'Terrestrial Bromeliad Care', 'Tillandsia Care', 'Bromeliads In The Terrarium', 'Mounting Bromeliads', 'Forcing The Issue' (forcing blooming) and 'A Media Event' (potting soil info).

**Visit these informative websites for comprehensive information on bromeliads and their culture:**

[Bromeliad Society International \(bsi.org\)](http://bsi.org) and [Florida Council Of Bromeliad Societies \(fcbs.org\)](http://fcbs.org)

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