

# TILLANDSIA

## The Care and Feeding of Air Plants

*Tillandsia* is a genus of around 700 species of evergreen, perennial, flowering plants in the family Bromeliaceae, native to the forests, mountains and deserts of Central and South America, the southern United States and the West Indies. *Tillandsia* species are epiphytes (also called aerophytes or air plants) – i.e. they normally grow without soil while attached to other plants. Generally, the thinner-leaved varieties grow in rainy areas and the thick-leaved varieties in areas more subject to drought. Moisture and nutrients are gathered from the air (dust, decaying leaves and insect matter) through structures on the leaves called trichomes (modified scales and hairs).



## HOME SWEET HOME

Tillandsias can be found growing on the ground, on the branches and trunks of trees, and attached to rocky cliffs. The sole purpose of their root system is to attach to a surface to gain needed light exposure. Some Tillandsia actually have little or no root system at all. They absorb all the nutrients and water needed through their leaves. As with any other plant, duplicating their natural environment as closely as possible is the key to growing them successfully in your home.

**Misnomer:** Air plants do not need light or water.

This is incorrect. They require light and water like all plants. They obtain these and other elements in less traditional ways than plants growing in soil.



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# PROPER CARE REQUIREMENTS

There are two main groups of Tillandsia: **Mesic:** needing moderate moisture, and **Xeric:** needing dry, desert conditions.

## BLOOM

Flowers can be inconspicuous to exotic depending on type. To promote blooms give your plant the maximum allowable light with sufficient water and fertilizer. Be patient as they are slow to mature to bloom size.

## GROWTH CYCLE

The blooming part of the plant will eventually fade away after being replaced by the new growth, called "pups". Flowers may also produce viable seed.

## LIGHT

Bright, indirect light with up to 1-3 hours of direct sun in the early or late part of the day is ideal. Too little light causes characteristics of discoloration of plant leaves, all over fading, or leaves falling apart during watering or handling. Too much light can result in browning (burnt) leaves.



**FURTHER READING:** [Air Plants- The Curious World of Tillandsias](#) by Zenaida Sengo

## WATER

(Use the method which suits you best).

**Misting:** Daily for Mesic types. Every other day for Xeric types. Be cautious about overspray on furniture and surrounding areas.

**Dunking:** Briefly dunk upside down and shake off excess water. Mesic types 3-4x/week; Xeric types 1x/7-10 days.

**Soaking:** Submerge plant completely for 1-2 hours about 1x/week. Shake off excess water when finished.

**Troubleshooting:** Too little water results in deeply channeled leaves that curve inward on themselves. Too much water leads to rot. After watering hang plants upside-down to drain completely. Make sure they air dry between waterings.

## TEMPERATURE

Normal room temperatures are adequate. Always keep them above 40°F.

## FERTILIZER

Fertilizing is of lesser importance than meeting the basic needs of light and water. When used, fertilizer must be water soluble to be absorbed through the trichomes. An Orchid/Epiphyte fertilizer works best. Read and follow package instructions. If misting, consider moving the plant to a sink or outdoors before applying any fertilizer.

**Frequency:** Biweekly, monthly, quarterly. The more frequently you fertilize, the weaker the solution should be.