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Breath Taking Air Plants

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Photo by dmp, UConn 2018

The recently held Connecticut Flower & Garden Show welcomes spring with its lovely landscapes, exquisite floral arrangements, unique vendors but mostly with the thousands of plants, bulbs and seed packets available for purchase. Several of the vendors were offering various species of tillandsias, commonly called air plants.

They are quite popular because not only do they look interesting and quite different from other houseplants, but they do not need soil or potting mix to grow in. So, they can be grown almost anywhere light and temperatures allow. According to Yumi Chen of Yumi Jewelry & Plants air plants are a favorite of apartment dwellers and college students as they do not take up much space nor do they require a lot of care.

Tillandsias are a genus in the Bromeliad family. They are epiphytes which is a fancy way of saying they are plants that typically grow on other plants, often in the crotches of trees and shrubs. They may also grow on rocks, cacti and even on the ground. Tillandsias are native to parts of the southern U.S., Central and South America.

Unlike most plants that we are familiar with, tillandsias only use their roots to anchor themselves to a living or non-living object. Water and nutrients are not taken up by the roots but rather by the leaves. As a general rule of thumb, those with thicker leaves are native to drier areas while those with thinner leaves grow where there is more rainfall and humidity.



There are over 650 different species of air plants. Many have slender or strap-shaped leaves but a few larger ones have more triangular-shaped leaves. While they are grown primarily for their curious mop-like shapes, they do have interesting tubular or funnel-shaped flowers often in bright colors.

Caring for tillandsias is not difficult as long as their basic cultural needs are met. Providing air plants with the water and nutrients they need is the key to healthy plants. Their leaves have specialized microscopic structures on them called trichomes that are hollow tissue cells that absorb any moisture they come into contact with. They also give many species of tillandsias their lovely silvery blue sheen.



Suggested watering regimes vary depending on who you talk to and which websites are visited. Keith Clark of [KC Exotic Air Plants](#) recommends soaking plants 3 to 4 hours every 2 weeks while Ms. Chen suggests a 30-minute weekly soaking. Other regimes include misting or placing them under a faucet of running water. Like most plants, how often they are watered depends on the species of plant as well as climate conditions. During warmer, drier periods because of home heating or summer sun, plants probably need to be watered more frequently. Also, if they are kept in humid bathrooms and kitchens, they may need less water. Since I just purchased my first air plant, I will see how it fares with a once a week half-hour soaking.

Both vendors as well as [Tillandsia International](#) stress the need to let the air plants dry out before putting them back in their pots, bowls, globes or other containers. If your tap water is chlorinated, consider using bottled, well or rain water instead.

Air plants do not require a lot of nutrients and respond well to a bromeliad fertilizer (17-8-22). The easiest way to fertilizer according to Ms. Chen is to mix a quarter teaspoon of fertilizer into a gallon of water and use this solution to soak your plants in once a month from spring through fall. Plants typically are not fertilized during the winter months. Tillandsias need bright, indirect light but few do well in full sun. Place in an east or north window or 3 to 5 feet away from brighter southern or western exposures. They can also be grown using artificial light.

Plants will develop roots but since these are only needed to anchor the plants to trees and other objects, they are often trimmed away before plants are sold. As the roots grow back, they can be left on the plant or cut off depending on how it is being displayed. Because of their unique shape and growth habits they can be placed in hanging glass globes, used to fill decorative bowls or other containers, included in succulent dish gardens or attached to wall hangings. Because they need good air circulation, they might not do well in enclosed terrariums.



When an air plant finally matures, which takes about 9 to 12 months for the smaller species according to Mr. Clark, it blooms and then produces offshoots, generally referred to as pups. When these reach about one third of the size of the parent plant, they can be separated but often they are left intact creating colonies of air plants, which are more vigorous than individuals.

Cut off any dead leaves and if the plant develops brown tips, they can be trimmed off. Tillandsias are pretty tough plants but sometimes are forgotten about. Shriveled plants may be regenerated by soaking for 24 hours. Provide your plant with adequate light, water and temperatures above 45° and these delightful plants can be employed in a variety of scenarios around the home and at the office.

For more information on growing tillandsias or other horticultural questions, feel free to contact us, the [UConn Home & Garden Education Center](#), toll-free at (877) 486-6271, or contact your local Cooperative Extension center.