

December 26, 2018



Quirky Exotic Air Plants- Tillandsias

Pauline Atkins

UCCE Master Gardener Program of El Dorado County

With the doldrums of Winter upon us, now is a good time to think about an indoor garden. Consider adopting a family of adorable Tillandsias. Commonly known as Air Plants, these little plants are fun, and easy to grow. The care of Air Plants is especially entertaining for children, and mature adults. These plants come in many sizes, shapes, and textures. The best part, no dirt necessary! All they need to thrive is light, water, and air.

These oddball plants are from the Bromeliad family, which also includes Pineapple, and Spanish Moss. They originate from Central, and South America, and grow on rocks, tree branches, bark, and even telephone wires, without soil. Please note, that Air Plants are not parasites. They need to cling to a host, in order to get light, and moisture. They are “epiphytes” which means, upon a plant. Tillandsias receive hydration, and nutrients thru their leaves, from water, and air. Growing harmlessly upon another plant, they absorb moisture, from humid air, rain, and sometimes debris that falls around them.

Air Plants can be purchased from larger local nurseries, some big box stores, and the internet. You can start by purchasing a few small inexpensive plants. Once you have a few, you will probably get hooked, and increase your indoor garden to include a variety of colors, shapes, and sizes.

Starting with Light, find a spot in your home that has an East, South, or West facing window, with good air circulation. The light in this location should be bright, filtered, and indirect, with no direct sunlight in the summer months. A kitchen window would be a perfect location choice, if the light criteria is suitable. Close proximity to a kitchen sink, for watering is optimal.

Even though Tillandsias are called Air Plants, they need Water to survive. Your plants need to be thoroughly wetted 2-3 times per week. Possibly, more often if hot, and dry, less if cool, and humid. Misting is an option for watering, but if your plants are in the kitchen, it is easy just to dunk them in a container of water. If you have forgotten to water your plants, another option would be to soak your plants in water for 1-2 hours, or longer. The leaves will absorb the water, and rehydrate.

Temperatures in your home should ideally be between 50-90 degrees F, but plants can tolerate temps a bit higher, or lower. Freezing temperatures will kill your Air Plants since they are tropical in nature.

Air Plants set stems, and bloom, although it may take awhile before you see blooms. Be patient. Spent blooms, and dead, or brown leaves can be trimmed off plant without harm. Reproduction occurs naturally with the plants putting out, “pups” from the base of the mother plant. They can easily be separated when pup is about ½ the size of the mother plant.

Although not absolutely necessary, water-soluble fertilizer can increase blooming, and reproduction. Use only about an 8th teaspoon per gallon of water. Use a spray bottle to administer fertilizer to your plants leaves once a month during the summer.

Now the fun part...displaying your plants! A variety of different containers can be used for display. Small ceramic vases, or bowls work well. Use rocks or pebbles to prop up your plants. Mismatched dishes from Goodwill are wonderful options. Your Air Plants are transient, so they can be displayed in different areas for special occasions. Just be sure to get them back to the light.

You can tuck a couple feathery Air Plants on an Orchid sitting on your windowsill. These companion plants look charming. Shells are another way to display your little plants. Just be careful not to leave a puddle of water on the bottom of your container, after watering your plants. Standing water will cause root rot to the base of your plant. Also note that Air Plants can be attached with Super Glue to a piece of wood to be displayed. Terrariums, also work well. The options are endless!

On February 23rd we will be hosting a ***Sustainable Organic Gardening*** Workshop, at the Cameron Park Community Center, 2502 Country Club Drive, Cameron Park, 95682. ***Sustainable Organic***

Gardening will help you develop a backyard food source that's cost-effective, improves your family's nutrition and food security, and offers a healthy hobby for the whole family. Whether you have a patio container garden or a quarter acre to farm, you can grow an abundance of healthy, delicious food through sustainable organic gardening practices. There is a fee for this one-day workshop, lunch included, \$25.00. To learn more and to pre-register, please visit our website <http://ucanr.edu/sustainable-organic-gardening> or call (530)-621-5528.

UCCE Master Gardeners of El Dorado County are available to answer home gardening questions Tuesday through Friday, 9:00 a.m. to noon, by calling [\(530\) 621-5512](tel:5306215512). Walk-ins are welcome at our office, located at 311 Fair Lane in Placerville. Visit us at the Sherwood Demonstration Garden, located at 6699 Campus Drive in Placerville, behind Folsom Lake College – El Dorado Center. The garden is open on the second Saturday of each month, 9:00 a.m. to noon, till April 2019.

For more information about our public education classes and activities, go to our UCCE Master Gardeners of El Dorado County website at <http://mgeldorado.ucanr.edu>. Sign up to receive our online notices and e-newsletter at http://ucanr.edu/master_gardener_e-news. You can also find us on Facebook.