



Air Plants

The Curious World of Tillandsias

By Zenaïda Sengo

Photographs by Caitlin Atkinson

Review by Karen Andreas

At long last, a Tillandsia guide for the urban dweller, and, in general, it is a terrific book. Lavishly illustrated with quality photographs, it is packed with pictures of greyish leaf Tillandsias, generous how-to pictures, and information on how to grow these bromeliads indoors.

The first one hundred pages of this book encompass basic Tillandsia information with extensive information on care. Here, the basics of the genus (xeric versus mesic) are covered; the emphasis is mostly on the xeric Tillandsias we know as greyish- leaf with little on the softer, green leaf versions.

Included is a very nice discussion on trichomes with intimate close-ups, followed by information on bloom cycles, inflorescences (how to remove spent ones also shown) and flowers. Growth habits, pups, sun and light are also addressed. The author's advice on light considerations is right on. Watering is extensively discussed in a dozen pages, accompanied by large photographs. Temperature, fertilizing, pup removal are not neglected. Before you cringe at the advice to pull off or break off the pups, remember these are grayish leaf Tillandsias featured here – and gently prying or sometimes even popping off the pups work well.

Pest, fungus and rot get their own pages. There is no clearer sign that this is a book published in California than the total absence of any mention of the Mexican bromeliad weevil. The only insect pest mentioned is mealy bugs; I suspect that is a function of indoor growing.

Companion planting finishes the first section of the book. The next section, Tillandsias on Display, is fun, informative and even whimsical.

Ms. Sengo enjoys using Tillandsias throughout the house as art, horticultural display, even as living screening. Ms. Atkin's photographs here (as well as throughout this book) are terrific, and ample examples are offered. Tillandsias are perched on pencil cactus, rocks, wired onto dried

branches, on walls in imaginative arrays. Containers range from decorative to wooden vessels to shallow dishes to leather pouches. Lasso and hook wiring is demonstrated in detail. Vertical screens and plantings are inspirational.

There is yet another extensive section, this one on terrariums. Once again, painstakingly illustrated, the author cautions that the lack of air movement in closed containers especially doom the bromeliads to eventual death and should be considered only temporary displays – albeit ones that last longer than cut flowers. Still, there are open bowl terrariums that promise longevity for the grayish leaf denizens.

Whimsical uses are also suggested. Tillandsias as rings, necklaces, hair adornments are silly yet elegant. The wreath illustrations redeem the disposable whimsy.

For those of us who are lucky enough to live in Florida where we grow bromeliads outdoors, there may be some points in the book that raise eyebrows. Indoor growing is quite different from our back yards and shade houses, and I think that the author has hit the right points in advice about light, water and even display, most of which is quite imaginative, fresh and new. It's nice to see bromeliads from the perspective of someone outside the usual circle of bromeliad authors.

Air Plants, The Curious World of Tillandsias, is a welcomed addition to the modern bromeliad library.