

# The Florida East Coast Bromeliad Society

Next meeting Sunday, May 13th , 1:30p.m.

Colony in the Wood – club house

4000 S. Clyde Morris Blvd., Port Orange 32129

May, 2012

## Field Trip to Ocala and ‘Back to Basics’

**President – Rick Ryals 386/679-8700**

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**Treasurer – Eve Krauth 386/763-2084**

### **This month’s meeting...**

First, we’re off to Ocala on May 6th to visit the Aldrichs’ nursery ‘Plants and Things’ and that should be a real treat! George and Irene have a beautiful place and a mind-boggling variety of bromeliads, so bring your shopping list. I’m sure you’ll all end up with more bromeliads in your collections than before you left to join in this field trip!

The program for this month’s meeting will be a bit of a refresher course for the more experienced growers in our group and an opportunity to pick up on some of the basics involved in growing bromeliads for the less experienced club members. Since this is a great time of the year to separate and repot your bromeliads, we’ll cover how to go about this as well as what to look for that may indicate trouble ahead for your plants. Bring your questions with you – this will be very informal (are we ever very formal?), so don’t be afraid to speak up when you have questions and we’ll try to answer them to your satisfaction.

This will also be a “member sales” month. If you have some extra bromeliads or bromeliad-related items, this is an opportunity to free up some extra room and make a few dollars in the process! The only thing that we ask of you is that each member/vendor who

sells items must donate something (one or more items) to the raffle table of at least a \$10 value.

### **Last month’s meeting –**

...we didn’t have one!

### **Back to Basics – Part 3**

Last month we discussed some differences in clay and plastic pots and left our bromeliad grower with a fresh pot in one hand and a plant in the other, but ran out of space in the newsletter before we could examine some of the choices out there for a good potting mix, so we put the plant in an empty pot until this month’s installment. After 30 days in an empty pot most plants would wither and blow away in our brisk Spring breezes, but not bromeliads! In fact, some years ago the owner of a bromeliad nursery confessed to me that she could not keep *Vriesea fosteriana* alive unless she grew it in an empty pot! How can that be? Remember that many bromeliads are epiphytic and in their native environment generally develop roots to function as “hold-fasts”. That is, they serve to anchor the plant to a substrate which in most cases is either a tree limb or rock. The ability of these roots to supply the plant with moisture or nutrients is minimal at best and often thought of as nonexistent in mature plants. There are

exceptions to this of course (the terrestrial bromeliads like pineapples and dykias), but generally speaking, the soil under a bromeliad is not the most important environmental factor in its life, so leaving a “bare-root” bromeliad in an empty pot for a month or two...or three is hardly the worst thing that you can do to it!

It's often said that the best potting media to use for bromeliads is one that drains well so that the roots and base of the plant are not kept wet for prolonged periods. That's pretty good advice, so how come if you ask three different hobbyists what potting mix they use for their bromeliads, you get three different answers? Everyone, it seems has their personal preference and even, sometimes their own secret mix. The truth of the matter however, is that certain basic ingredients can usually be found in any mix. These are as follows:

**Peat** - This is the main ingredient in most commercial potting mixes. Peat is organic material produced by long-term decomposition of plant materials. Peat is harvested from many different areas in the world and varies somewhat in appearance depending on the source. All forms are acidic and serve to hold moisture in potting mixes. Often you will find commercially grown bromeliads, particularly Guzmanias, mounted in a potting mix resembling spongecake that is 100% peat. You may be able to postpone watering for quite some time once this material gets wet. On the other hand, once peat gets very dry it can be very difficult to rehydrate it, so you need to pay close attention to your watering practices.

**Vermiculite** - This is a mineral (mica) that is expanded by a carefully controlled heat treatment process. The end product is a multi-layered material resembling a tiny stack of pancakes(why does everything remind me of food?). Vermiculite is very lightweight and comes in several sizes or grades. Some sources may be alkaline in nature and can contain calcium, magnesium, and other minerals. Mixes using vermiculite may

compact with age leading to a media that retains moisture and become very soggy during our rainy season- the very time that you need one that quickly drains. You may want to avoid using this material.

**Perlite** - This is another mineral processed by heat treatment resulting in a white, irregularly shaped, lightweight material. Unlike vermiculite however, perlite does not compress in a mix. Moisture retention in the potting mix decreases as the amount of perlite added is increased, so if you are one who blends their own potting mix, you can tailor-make the blend to match your watering practices. Water your plants often – use a lot of perlite in the mix. Rarely water – use less perlite. Dust can be a problem in handling perlite, so a dust mask should be worn whenever working in a closed space with this material to reduce the possible inhalation hazard.

**Poly-beads** - These are tiny spheres of polystyrene and like the previous two materials, are extremely lightweight and inert. Unlike vermiculite and perlite, however, poly-beads neither contribute to increased mix alkalinity nor add unwanted minerals (some sources of perlite may contain fluoride, which may be harmful to some bromeliad varieties).

**Sand** - Oxides of silica and virtually inert, sands are available in different grades ranging from fine to course. This will add weight to the potting mix due to the density of the sand particles, but contrary to expectations, sand (particularly the finer grades) can actually decrease drainage by plugging the pore spaces of the mix.

**Bark/Wood chips** - A logical choice for a potting mix ingredient since many bromeliads attach themselves to trees in their natural environment. Many barks are reputed to have antifungal properties and usually are acidic-those are both good things. Both bark and chips add to a good draining mix and are long lasting. In the landscape it is often cautioned

that these materials prevent the nitrogen component in fertilizers from reaching plant roots, but this isn't really a problem for bromeliads since they don't have the same nitrogen requirements that are usually recommended for other types of plants.

So, there you have it - those are the main ingredients of potting mixes. It doesn't seem like making a mix from a blend of these materials should be all that difficult, but take a look at the shelves of any garden supply store and you will find a bewildering array of different potting mixes. Which one should you choose? It all depends on your situation and the plants that you intend to grow in the mix. You will notice right away that of all the mixes for sale in that garden supply store none are marked "for bromeliads". It's just too limited a market for the supplier of the mix. He needs to sell a lot of material to a wide range of gardeners and not just to a few crazed bromeliad enthusiasts if he wants to keep food on his table. The first thing you should look at then is the list of ingredients on the side of the bag. If you see that a large fraction of the mix is vermiculite, you may want to continue looking until you find one with a comparable percentage of perlite or poly-beads instead. If you have had a problem with your mix staying moist for too long, look for one that will drain more quickly (high percentage of perlite or poly-beads). If, on the other hand, your mixes are often too dry - look for one with a lower percent of perlite. Sounds confusing? It can be as you compare one commercial mix with another so maybe you should consider mixing your own. It's cheaper and certainly simple enough. Just buy bags of the individual components and blend them yourself to give you the mix that you feel the most comfortable with. Confidence goes a long way toward ensuring success in many fields and gardening is no different. If you feel confident that you have the right type of mix for growing your plants, chances are your plants will thrive. Someone else may be equally confident with his mix-which is different from yours yet those plants also will

do well. Maybe the differences in the mixes aren't all that important? You decide. Loyalty to a particular brand of mix can be very strong and that's what the manufacturer is counting on. In reality, it's largely a matter of personal preference and most commercial mixes will do equally well for you. On the other hand...maybe there is a secret blend out there...?

Fertilizers...should you mix them in the potting material? Is fertilizer already in the commercial mix that you buy at the big box stores? Do you even want to be adding fertilizers to your mix when you pot-up those offsets? We should probably talk about this a bit - so stay tuned for next month's installment.

#### **Master Gardeners' Spring Faire -**

As expected, this was a lot of fun. We had excellent participation by our club members, sold lots of bromeliads, and had the opportunity to educate and inform the public about what bromeliads are and what they are not. Thank you everyone who helped out on this fund raiser!



The line started to form at daybreak - waiting for the gates to open!



Spirits were high and plants practically flew off the tables as the public rushed through the gates.



You had to get there early to see this beautiful variety of sale plants.

**Upcoming Events:**

**May 12<sup>th</sup>-13<sup>th</sup>, 2012**

Central Florida Bromeliad Society annual Mother's Day show and sale at the Fashion Square Mall, Orlando

**May 13<sup>th</sup>, 2012**

FECBS monthly meeting (yes, it occurs on Mother's Day – you have a problem with that?)

**June 10<sup>th</sup>, 2012**

FECBS monthly meeting with guest speaker David Johnston who will tell us about 'species' plants that you should have in your collections. What's a species plant? You need to attend this informative program!

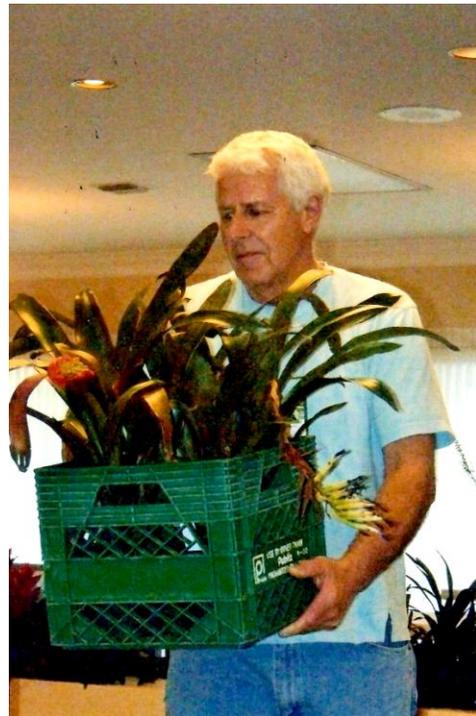
**September 24th-30th**

2012 Bromeliad Society International (BSI)

World Bromeliad Conference hosted by Florida Council of Bromeliad Societies at The Caribe Royal, 8101 World Center, Orlando, FL 32821 – Check out the BSI website ([www.bsi.org](http://www.bsi.org)) or the Florida Council Website for registration forms and the latest information.



President Rick Ryals with Dr. Howard Frank and his lovely wife – photo by Michele Kelly



Brad Rauch has his hands full with "Show and Tell" plants at a recent meeting – photo by Michele Kelly

