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Native Bromeliads of Florida

Reviewed by Chuck McCartney

Among plants adding to the tropical ambience of much of Florida's natural landscape are members of the plant family Bromeliaceae, the bromeliads. These are our so-called "air plants," and they are the most commonly seen and widespread group of epiphytes, or tree-growing plants, found in our state.

Bromeliaceae is sometimes called the pineapple family because that ground-growing species, *Ananas comosus* from Brazil, is the most familiar representative of the group. But equally familiar to people who have traveled in the American South is Spanish Moss, *Tillandsia usneoides*, which is, at first glance, about as un-pineapple-like as you can get. But this most widespread of all bromeliads – it ranges from coastal Virginia all the way south to central Argentina and is found in all 67 counties of Florida – is one of the 16 species and two presumed natural hybrids in the family considered native to our state.

These plants are spotlighted in an excellent new book titled *Native Bromeliads of Florida* by Harry E. Luther and David H. Benzing. At just 126 pages, this concise, informative book is published – appropriately enough – by Sarasota's Pineapple Press for the modest price of \$16.95. It is nicely illustrated with black-and-white pictures and a few line drawings plus 38 generally high-quality color photographs depicting all the species discussed.

Harry Luther is the resident bromeliad expert at the Marie Selby Botanical Gardens in Sarasota. David Benzing, who holds a Ph.D. in botany from the University of Michigan, has researched and written extensively on vascular epiphytes, especially

bromeliads and orchids. Thus, the reader of *Native Bromeliads of Florida* could not ask for a more authoritative pair of writers on the subject.

The book delineates Florida's 18 native bromeliads, including the three that do not occur in the southern end of the state – *Tillandsia bartramii*, the apparently endemic *Tillandsia simulata*, and *Tillandsia x floridana*, a putative hybrid of *T. bartramii* and *T. fasciculata* var. *densispica*.

It also discusses familiar South Florida species, such as the widespread and beautiful *Tillandsia fasciculata*, with its flame red flower spikes (even though the red comes from colorful bracts protecting the small, tubular purple flowers) and the even more widespread but not so beautiful Ball Moss, *Tillandsia recurvata*. There's a discussion of our largest bromeliad, *Tillandsia utriculata*, which is unique among our native species in that it flowers only once then dies. The rarities also are covered, including the tiny *Catopsis nutans*, which is known in the state only from the Fakahatchee Strand, and the comical and/or eerie little Fuzzy-Wuzzy Air Plant, *Tillandsia pruinosa*, which doesn't venture very far from the Fakahatchee. Also with its major Florida populations in the Fakahatchee is *Guzmania monostachia*, the only member of that genus in the state. And then we learn about our insect-eating "carnivorous" air plant, *Catopsis berteroniana*.

Each of these bromeliads and the others in the state is treated with a short chapter that includes a brief taxonomic history of the species, a dot distribution map showing in which of Florida's 67 counties the species occurs, a description of the plant and a discussion of its habitat

as well a mention of its distribution outside Florida, plus other interesting tidbits about the species.

There is also a dichotomous key to help distinguish among the three native bromeliad genera (*Catopsis*, *Guzmania* and *Tillandsia*), with further keys to the three *Catopsis* species and 14 tillandsias. The keys are written in language that's fairly easy to understand for the amateur, and there is a glossary in the back of the book to help with any unfamiliar terms.

But what makes this book equally informative is the introductory material. In just 42 pages, the authors provide a primer on the family Bromeliaceae, which is made up of some 3,400 species mainly in the New World tropics and subtropics, with an odd outlier in adjacent West Africa. In clear, accessible prose, the authors discuss the anatomy and physiology of bromeliads, as well as providing a brief look at the general taxonomy of the family, always putting the Florida species into context within the topic being discussed. There is also a discussion about the threat to our bromeliads by the invasive *Metamesius* beetle.

This introductory material is invaluable, as is the whole volume. Students and lovers of our indigenous flora will definitely want to add *Native Bromeliads of Florida* to their library. And it's a publishing bargain to boot.

Native Bromeliads of Florida

Harry E. Luther and David H. Benzing
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Editorial Content

We welcome articles on native plant species and related conservation topics, as well as high-quality botanical illustrations and photographs. Contact the editor for guidelines, deadlines and other information.

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The purpose of the Florida Native Plant Society is to conserve, preserve, and restore the native plants and native plant communities of Florida.

Official definition of native plant:

For most purposes, the phrase Florida native plant refers to those species occurring within the state boundaries prior to European contact, according to the best available scientific and historical documentation. More specifically, it includes those species understood as indigenous, occurring in natural associations in habitats that existed prior to significant human impacts and alterations of the landscape.

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