

## Bromeliads add Holiday Cheer!

December in NJ can be described as a rather calm, perhaps even a drab month for the Garden. Most of the outdoor plants are in a sound slumber, forcing the color starved gardener to turn their attention indoors for some festive colors. If you have become bored with Poinsettias, here are two Bromeliads that provide an attractive and long-lived addition for your December festivities.

Bromeliads are found within the family Bromeliaceae and features 51 genera and over 3,450 species – talk about an extended family for the Holidays! Father Charles Plumier (1646-1704), a French Botanist, Franciscan Brother and royal botanist to King Louis XIV named the family in 1703 after his friend, the Swedish physician and botanist Olaf Bromelius (1639-1705). Of the 51

genera available, *Aechmea* provide selections that not only have colorful foliage, but also an ironclad constitution. *Aechmea fasciata* or Urn Plant has long been appreciated for its silver highlighted foliage and its ease of culture. *Aechmea* is from Greek *Aichme* meaning spear and a reference to the spear-like barbs that line the leaf margins. The species epithet is from the Latin *fascia* for a band or stripe and refers to the banding or mottling



of silver and green along the foliage (the silver banding can be seen in the image above). If you are seeking a more user friendly selection, *Aechmea fasciata* 'Primera' has smooth leaf margins



(also seen in the image above). *Aechmea* species are also described as a 'tank plant', since the radiating rosette of foliage overlaps so tightly at the base that it forms a watertight urn – hence, the common name! They have adapted to numerous nutrient poor environments throughout Central and South America and are not only terrestrial, but have adapted to epiphytic or tree-top environments as well as lithophytic or stone cliffs. Its key to survival is the 'tank', botanically called a phytotelma or phytotelmata if plural. The phytotelma becomes a swimming pool for a veritable cocktail of creatures that not only urinate in the water, but also perish, releasing nitrogen and other important nutrients in the process and allowing the plant to survive in these nutrient deserts. Urn Plant also produces an exquisite 3-4" diameter flower through the center of the tank, which features a rosette of pink bracts with deep blue flowers appearing at the base of each bract (as

seen in the both images above). The flowers are very effective for upwards of 3 months! As they

fade, so fades the mother plant, but she is replaced by 2-3 small offsets or pups at the base of the plant. When the pups are a minimum of 6” tall, they can be separated via a sharp knife and replanted!

If you prefer a splash of red, consider *Aechmea lueddemaniana* ‘Mend’. The species was originally described by the German botanist Karl Heinrich Emil Koch (1809-1879) in honor of the French horticulturist H. Lueddemann. The straight species typically has green foliage with red highlights, reaching 20” tall by 36” wide. ‘Mend’ has foliage with brilliant red, pink or salmon margins and a deep green center (pictured on the right). It makes a perfect centerpiece for the Holidays! It receives its cultivar name from the first initials of those who helped to develop the plant. M is for Mildred Merkel who named the plant; E is for Edward Ensign who sowed the seed; N is from Julian Nally who gave the seed to Ensign and the D is in memory of the bromeliad collector, explorer and breeder, Ralph Davis. This past summer I planted ‘Mend’ in containers with various other stalwart annuals, only to discover that the containers had not been watered throughout a very hot and dry August. Most of the plants looked absolutely haggard or had simply died while the *Aechmea* looked just as perfect as the day it was planted. This is one tough plant!



*Aechmea* plants develop their best leaf coloration in morning sun or day-long dappled shade. They can tolerate full sun, but the leaves often scorch or discolor in the relentless heat.



Fortunately, *Aechmea* ‘Mend’ did not seem to be troubled by direct exposure to full sun, although the deep green centers did turn to an olive green. The soil should be high in organic matter and allowed to drain well in between watering. Obviously, the plants will even endure periods of drought! During the summer, the tanks should be filled with water (as seen on the left with *Aechmea fasciata*) but left dry during the winter to prevent decay.

If you are color starved and in search of something different this December, both the Urn Plant and Mend Bromeliad are excellent substitutes for Poinsettias, providing cheer for the Holiday Season and for years to come!