

Air Plants

Tillandsia

About Air Plants

Air plants are named for their process of getting water: through the air. With more than 500 species in the genus *Tillandsia*, these are some of the easiest plants to grow in your home or office, given proper sun, water, and air circulation. They look like little tufts of grass with a silver or gray appearance and can range in size from 1 to 6 inches wide.

Air plants are epiphytes, meaning they attach to another object for support, but not in a harmful way. In nature, the sole purpose of their roots is for attachment and they often grow on trees and rocks. The leaves take on the role of absorbing water and nutrients from the environment.

Air Plant Care

Bright, indirect sunlight is needed to keep air plants healthy. Good air circulation is also essential to allow the plant to dry out between watering and to prevent disease on the foliage.



Tillandsia growing in an open ornament terrarium. A thin layer of pebbles holds the plant in place.

Dry plants will curl or roll, dull in color, and tips may brown. When watering, they can be misted, rinsed, or soaked. Mist plants every other day until run-off occurs. To rinse, place the plant under lukewarm water for a few seconds and then laying it face down on a towel to drain off the excess water. This should be done at least one to two times per week. The plants can also be submerged in lukewarm water for 30 minutes and drained well.

Allow plants to dry for several hours before placing them back in a terrarium. While not necessary for success, fertilize air plants with a balanced, all-purpose fertilizer once a month at quarter-strength of the recommended rate while watering.

Small flowers, varying in color and shape will occasionally form on air plants. Blooms rising out of the center of the foliage are pink, purple, and red. After a mature plant flowers, it will die and new plants called offsets, or pups will grow at the base of the mother plant. These offsets separate easily from the mother plant so you can share with others. You can also leave pups attached to develop a ball or mound of plants.

After the threat of frost has passed in the spring, air plants make nice additions to your outdoor garden or patio. Place them in a bright but shaded location out of the late-day sun. Hang air plants from trees or pergolas for character and to create layers in the landscape. Keep plants watered well throughout the summer. Bring plants indoors once night temperatures fall below freezing.

Since air plants do not need to grow in soil, they can be grown practically anywhere. They look beautiful growing among other organic elements (think bark, driftwood, rocks, moss, and shells), or even on a bookshelf or windowsill that needs some color. Air plants also make nice additions to open terrariums or dish gardens.

AUTHOR

Brittnay Haag, Illinois Extension Horticulture Educator
bhaag@illinois.edu | (309) 663-8306