

## Blooms for a High-Rise Balcony

Written by Jeff Shimonski, BT Contributor  
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### Air plants are easy to move during storm prep

A



number of years ago, I was asked to consult on creating a bougainvillea wall of foliage on a balcony at a large new condominium. I didn't think it would be practical but went mainly to see this new condo in all its glass-enclosed splendor. The unit's owner wanted the foliage and color to block the view into her home from condos in nearby buildings.

The wind on her balcony, more than 200 feet above grade, was impressive and blasting. Sure, there was plenty of sunlight during the day but any soft foliage on a typical windy day would get shredded, and plants not securely attached would likely be blown off in a high-wind event. It was a shame, but what this potential client wanted wasn't going to work, no matter how much money she spent.

I often look up at the thousands of new-built empty balconies and think what a shame, no horticultural curiosity here -- but what could you grow on these stark skyboxes? Well, what kinds of plants do grow in dry (xeric), windy conditions?

During my many travels to tropical climes, I've seen powerlines and communication towers hosting different species of bromeliads. Now, these aren't your typical large-leafed pineapple types of bromeliad. Nor do they serve as hosts to mosquito larvae, since they don't collect water in the axils of their foliage.

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But like most, if not all epiphytic (i.e., they grow on other plants) bromeliads, they have specialized structures on the surface of their foliage called trichomes. These are tiny, water-absorbing scales that help the plant survive in a soil-less environment; they take in atmospheric moisture and shield the plant from excessive solar radiation. This is what produces that silver-white fluff on the foliage of many bromeliad species. You'll notice that some species have more of the white fluffy stuff on their foliage when they're in more sunlight. Also notice that some bromeliad species have thick succulent leaves, too.

The accompanying photo shows a group of xeric bromeliads, *Tillandsia caput-medusae*, newly planted onto the trunk of a small tree using zip ties. The name of this species, or specific epithet, refers to the head of Medusa, a pretty cool name considering the way the foliage contorts and twists. This is one of the many bromeliad species that grow in dry conditions that you can propagate on your sunny balcony.

I'd attached these bromeliads on a tree trunk growing in a sunny area at Jungle Island when we opened and had lots of sunlight underneath the newly planted tree canopy. These *Tillandsia* did quite well and even started growing new plants at the base of the older mother plants as they began to die after flowering. But the area eventually got too shady, and the plants died. They don't grow well in shaded conditions. They need the bright light like you have on a sunlit balcony.

These "air plants" can be easily attached to a piece of dried wood or cork using zip ties or even superglue for the smaller ones. Then the sections can be attached to a stiff wire frame that is attached to your wall. They can be sprayed with water several times a week at low light times, like early morning or evening. No fertilizer is necessary because the trichomes absorb atmospheric nutrients from rainwater or mist.

Many *Tillandsia* species are quite small and can fit in the palm of your hand. Some, like *Tillandsia ionantha*, put on a striking show of color when they bloom. This color can last a couple of months. This bromeliad will grow into a good-sized clump and can be hung from a wire in an open area.

Some species have fragrant blooms at night, so when yours do bloom, bring them inside at nighttime and enjoy the fragrance. I've grown different varieties of *Tillandsia mallemonitii* for

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years, and have found them to be great conversation pieces with friends who enjoyed the distinct fragrance. I grew a clump of these the size of a dinner plate on the trunk of a coconut palm next to the entrance of my old house. You couldn't miss it when they were in bloom. Some fragrant species that are easy to grow include

*Tillandsia duratii*

,

*T. crocta*

, and

*T. purpurea*

, but there are many more as well.

Grow these bromeliads on panels or as hanging plants that you can take inside when you know a storm is coming. That way they won't blow off your balcony and can be put back outside after the winds pass. Since they don't need soil or a similar growing medium, they are clean and won't make a mess when you move them.

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