

Grower Profile: Tillandsia International

A visit to North America's largest tillandsia nursery reveals how to make the most of these trendy plants.

Text and photography by Bruce Wright

These are heady days for growers of tillandsias (also known as airplants). Demand is steadily increasing, from all sides: collectors, crafters, and yes, florists. Much the way succulents have skyrocketed in popularity—going from niche houseplants to a floral design staple—something similar has been happening with tillandsias.

The comparison raises some interesting questions. Succulents and tillandsias do have a lot in common. Both have intriguing, flowerlike shapes and come in a wide range of sizes and colors. Both have extraordinary lasting power, even away from a water source.

Both, it should be emphasized, can be used like cut flowers—and yet, they are actually not flowers but plants. Both succulents and tillandsias can produce striking and colorful flowers, but the flowers are not what most florists use primarily as design materials.

How should we think about these beautiful plants that also offer extraordinary utility and versatility in floral design?

WANTED, DEAD OR ALIVE “Some of our plants end up in flower shops, some in nurseries,” says Frank Messina, founder of the largest airplant grower in North America—Tillandsia International. “They are very different markets, and they use the plants in very different ways.”

“Flower shops usually have small areas for plants that are fairly dark and crowded compared to a nursery, away from light and air circulation,” Frank continues. “That’s not ideal for getting the maximum life span out of a tillandsia—but that’s OK, depending on your expectations.”

Likewise, he points out, florist and nursery customers often want to put a tillandsia “where it looks good in their homes, rather than where it’s going to do well. And that’s OK too. It will still last a good while, and when it dies, it can be replaced.”

Or not. Frank notes that he has seen tillandsias incorporated into designs—“living walls,” for example—that are actually dead. “People see the live plants and may think they are dead because they’re gray. But yes, they can also die and dry in place, and a person who’s not in the plant industry might have a hard time telling.”

With all that said, you and your customers will get the most enjoyment and value from tillandsias if you understand a little about what they are and how they thrive best.

LIVING ON AIR Go to the Tillandsia International website, www.airplant.com, and you’ll immediately see the explanation, “Tillandsias are bromeliads, but not all bromeliads are tillandsias.” Tillandsias are known as airplants because they do not live in the soil; they are typically found growing on rocks and trees, where they absorb nutrients and water through their leaves (see the caption below, “Air and Light”). They may have

roots, but the roots serve only to anchor the plants, not to deliver nutrients.

Tillandsias are so different from other plants—and different types of tillandsia can be so different from each other—that it may be hard to judge quality, even for a plant expert. “Different varieties have different textures, stiffness, softness, scaliness,” says Frank. “Some types are black on the bottom; others have purplish spots on the leaves. Some are more gray, some are more green, even when they are wet or dry. Both are healthy; it’s just a genetic variation.”

The plants must be shipped dry. “You never want to pack them wet, because they’ll rot,” says Frank. The risk, then, is that tillandsias might become dehydrated. How can you tell? The natural shape of most tillandsia leaves is slightly concave. When the plants become dehydrated, this concavity can become exaggerated, so the leaf folds in on itself. “But some types have thread-like leaves where it’s normal to have a point coming out of it,” Frank warns, “almost like



THE MYSTERY OF AIRPLANTS How do airplants manage to get all of their water and nutrients through their leaves? The answer lies in specialized structures on the surface of the leaves. When the plants are doused with water, these structures, called trichomes, open up to receive and absorb it. When that happens, they turn green. Then, as the plants dry, the trichomes return to their normal white or gray. Their appearance varies somewhat from one type of tillandsia to another, from fuzzy to smooth, but the function remains the same: the whiteness reflects bright sunlight away from the plant and helps it to conserve the moisture it has absorbed. The photo at left shows two plants of the same type—one wet, one dry.

AIR AND LIGHT At left, green (just-watered) plants at Tillandsia International, located in Coarsegold, California, thrive on a wire mesh platform that allows good air circulation, under bright, indirect light. The greenhouse is partially shaded during the summer; fans keep the air moving 24/7. The climate in central California is relatively dry, compared to some other places where airplants are grown (Florida, Central and South America), but founder Frank Messina argues that means his plants are better acclimatized when they reach a typical American home, compared with plants raised in a more humid environment.



ALL IN THE FAMILY In the wild, when tillandsias produce offshoots, in time the offshoots form a clustered colony, like the one at left. In a greenhouse, the grower has the choice to separate the offshoots into individual plants or to leave them in a natural cluster. The clusters demand a higher price, of course, and are much prized by collectors. They are not only beautiful but also especially hardy, because they have less surface area exposed.

grower profile

a grass. So there is almost no rule that applies across the board. All our people are trained not to send anything out unless it is top notch," he assures.

A fresh, healthy, living airplant has the potential to enhance a floral design, then go on to a second life as an intriguing houseplant, a keepsake and a conversation piece.

To learn more about tillandsias, check out the Tillandsia International website at www.airplant.com.



SPANISH MOSS Did you know that Spanish moss is not actually moss, but a type of tillandsia? The Spanish moss that florists buy (*Tillandsia usneoides*) is most often a dried product. The live Spanish moss has a fuller look and turns green when wet. "It actually has a fragrant flower on it when it blooms," says Frank. "We sell it [mainly to wholesale distributors] by the kilo or the pound."

Care tips for tillandsias

- Tillandsias thrive in bright, but filtered or indirect light, such as a shaded patio. They also respond well to full-spectrum artificial light.
- Thoroughly wet tillandsias two or three times a week, more often in a hot, dry environment, less often in a cool, humid one. Plants should be given enough light and air circulation to dry within four hours after watering.
- For more tips and photos, visit www.airplant.com.

Take a look

Tillandsia International sells mainly through wholesale distributors, including those listed here.

CALIFORNIA

Airplants4U
www.airplants4U.com
Brannan Street Wholesale Florist
www.brannanst.com
Coastal Tillandsia Supply
www.ctairplants.com
Flora Grubb
www.floragrubb.com
Grow Nursery
www.grownursery.com
Sunborne
www.sunborne.com
Wasabi Green
www.wasabigreen.com

COLORADO

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www.rikkistropicals.com

KENTUCKY

Plant Oddities
www.plantoddities.com

TEXAS

The Austin Flower Co.
www.austinflowers.com



SOMETHING FOR EVERYONE Tillandsias (also known as airplants) come in all sorts of colors, sizes and shapes. With 13 greenhouses on 178 acres, Tillandsia International offers some 400 different types, catering to a variety of end markets from florists to collectors. Above, founder Frank Messina holds a *Tillandsia xerographica* in bloom. Customers can ask for an assortment using specific criteria: size or price point, for example. But if you're a designer, says Frank, the best thing is to go to a distributor and have a look at what's available.



THE BLOOM CYCLE At far left on this page are two airplants of the same type, one green, the other blooming. At Tillandsia International, plants bloom mainly in the fall, winter, and spring—more rarely in summer. In the cooler months they are exposed to more direct light, which encourages the bloom cycle: in most types, the foliage colors up first, then the blooms emerge. When the bloom is finished, the red goes away and the plant begins to produce offshoots.

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