

BROMELIAD SOCIETY OF SAN FRANCISCO



June 2010

NEWSLETTER

Our next meeting will be held on **Thursday, May 20, 2010** at 7:30 PM
Recreation Room, San Francisco County Fair Building, 9th Avenue at Lincoln Way, Golden Gate Park,
San Francisco

June Program

Visit to the Conservatory of Flowers

This month we will be visiting the Conservatory of Flowers in Golden Gate Park. This will be our second visit since the remodeling and the plants have taken over. Mario is in charge of the bromeliads and will be our guide. We **will try to start the meeting at 7 PM** instead of 7:30 to maximize the remaining daylight. We will still have refreshments, show-and-tell plants and a plant raffle table.

Save this date on your busy schedule because we do not often get to see the plants all by ourselves.

June Refreshments

Dennis Westler and **Roger Lane** signed up for refreshments this month.



Here is our membership at the last tour when the conservatory was still under construction.



Here are our leaders for the last tour: **Marilyn Moyer** and **Dan Arcos**.

May Meeting

Last month **Carl Carter** provided a slide show of the bromeliads that we can grow in our landscape. He included slides of these plants in habitat as well as in cultivation. Many of the habitat shots were taken in Brazil where we went last month with **Peter Wan**, but Carl showed us completely different shots. Coincidentally, one of the plants in Carl's show was also on the plant table: *Deuterocohnia brevispicata*. Thanks for a great show, Carl. We enjoyed it just as much as Clyde.

Marilyn provided a great selection of plants for the raffle that was supplemented by our members. Thanks!

Welcome Back Returning Members

- Lana Fisher
- Dennis Westler

What You Should Know About Billbergias

This article by Don Beadle is reprinted from the March 2000 newsletter of the Caloosahatchee Bromeliad Society. Don, who is the grand hybridizer of Billbergias, originally wrote this article for the May-June 1991 Journal of the Bromeliad Society.

It may well be that the Billbergia was appreciated by natives of ancient South American civilizations before recorded history. But they did not leave evidence of their appreciation the way the early 19th century Europeans did in their many marvelous horticultural journals, gazettes, and magazines. That was the age of the great collectors and the great collections, and the Billbergia was introduced to Europe in 1815 where it charmed and intrigued the horticultural community. Hands colored drawings of these early imports dramatically illustrate this interest.

There are now over 60 described species with many distinctive varieties. The native range for the Billbergias is primarily eastern Brazil in the lower elevations, but several species are found in Peru, Ecuador, Venezuela, and as far north as central Mexico.

Billbergias resemble Aechmeas in form and habit and in fact differ taxonomically in only small ways such as structural details of the pollen grains and whether or not the sepal tip is "prickly". (The Billbergia is not). In habitat, the Billbergias are usually epiphytic in clumps, preferring any locations with bright shade or indirect light. In captivity, the Billbergia is usually individually imprisoned in heavy, wet soil, in dank, dismal, deep shady locations.

Glowing descriptions of the beauty of the Billbergia bloom inevitably end with the deflating phrase, "unfortunately, the bloom is so short-lived, lasting no more than two weeks". This, coupled with the outrageous allegation, "Billbergias are the easiest to propagate and grow of all bromeliads," has done much to delusion, discourage and deter the grower from an adventure with the billbergia.

The Billbergia has much to offer the grower today. A variety of sizes allow the growing of 3 foot tall, stoloniferous rosettes and 1 plus meter clumps of *Billbergia rosea* or *B. stenopetala*. The thin tubular shape of the helicoid Billbergia allows enjoyment of the color, form, and the spectacular bloom without the sacrifice of growing area. The efforts of hybridizers have resulted in the availability of new, hardy, and constantly colorful cultivars to which the bloom is merely an embellishment.

CULTURE

The Billbergia prefers whenever possible to be grown in an open, porous mix with good drainage. Since the majority of growers inevitably custom-design their own concoctions, no specific recommendations are made here. I use the commercial Promix because of its convenience and availability [this is probably a commercial mix found in Texas or Florida where Don has lived – Ed.] Billbergias do not universally develop large, strong root systems and Promix packs well enough to support the tall plants when they become top-heavy after watering. I grow many of them high overhead in the shade house and have never become adjusted to having them diving down on me when I fill them with water.

Pot shape and size seems to be more a matter of aesthetics than anything else, particularly in judged horticultural shows. I become embarrassed when I behold a single small billbergia alone and forlorn in the center of a huge, unattractive plastic pot. Please do not do this. Most tubular Billbergias suffer from a lack of conventional confirmation when displayed as single plants. They are naturally gregarious and seem to prefer clumping and community life and are best shown competitively as neat clumps. When left to choose their own arrangement, they seldom conform, unfortunately to our ideas of what orderly should be. The attractive arrangement of a clump requires the grower to remove the old mother plant when they begin to lose their glamour. Gaps need to be filled in by removing young offsets and replanting them in a more appropriate spot. Pruning should be merciless in order to keep a loose, open clump that will allow free access to air and light. An unattended clump will soon pack the pot with green, scaly, skinny things that will do little toward encouraging the grower to acquire more Billbergias. The spectacle of a well-grown hanging pot of colorful Billbergias in full bloom is a rewarding and spiritually uplifting sight.

Watering is another subjective subject. Most growers scheduled their watering by the clock and calendar, mystical signs, weather conditions, their general emotional state, etc.; I recommend a dispassionate approach based on whether the billbergia is wet or dry. My only problems have occurred from excess in one direction or the other. Billbergias do not seem to be overly sensitive to watering and I will confess to leaning toward to little rather than too much.

The imposition of a degree of stress into the everyday life of the Billbergia seems to produce a hardier, more compact, colorful, well-formed plant. This desirable condition is more easily obtained when the Billbergias are kept on a strict diet.

No single factor contributes more to the unattractiveness of a Billbergia than does overfeeding. Balance, in Billbergia, as in all things, is the key word. If you grow healthy plants in locations where they get good light for long periods with lots of moving air you may feed

them well and reap all the benefits from them. If you grow them in low light in stagnant conditions then feeding is a shamefully cruel process and you should look within and seek counsel.

My soil-less Promix provides only small initial doses of trace elements that are quickly used up. Peters Peat Lite mixes contain a balanced basic mixture of nutrients together with the needed trace elements. I usually mix Peters to a concentration of well under $\frac{1}{4}$ teaspoonful per gallon, which is continuously added to my water by a marvelous little proportioning device. I do not know if this is the proper amount but has apparently done no harm.

A summary of ideal growing conditions for Billbergias would be to grow them in open, elevated, airy locations with good light for long periods, with moderate amounts of good water, and with a minimum of fertilizer. Most Billbergias will survive from just above freezing to over 110 degrees. *Billbergia sanderiana* and most of its hybrids surprised me by ignoring 19 degrees for 30 hours. The large helicoids began to expire or to be seriously damaged in the low 40s. They are surprisingly tender. The best temperature range for color and confirmation seems to be cool to 50 degrees at night and balmy 70-75 degree days. I thrive under those conditions myself, but if they exist in South Texas it's for only one or two days in the spring and the fall, and that's all. We are all dealt conditions that are probably not ideal for the variety of plants we try to grow and I have found the Billbergia willing to adapt to a wide range of conditions. I've seen them grown in Illinois basements, New York apartment windows, hilltops in California, under the trees in Florida, anywhere at all in Australia, and even in the unrelenting winds of Corpus Christi. But these cannot happen by ignoring the particular needs of the plants. I note that the people who grow show quality Neoregelias and Vrieseas inevitably grow show quality Billbergias. The reciprocal is also true. The key is caring.

Billbergias are a little more obligating at breeding time than are some other Bromeliads. The appropriate parts are readily accessible and the process is well known. I have, however, set seed only about 15 percent of times I attempt to make

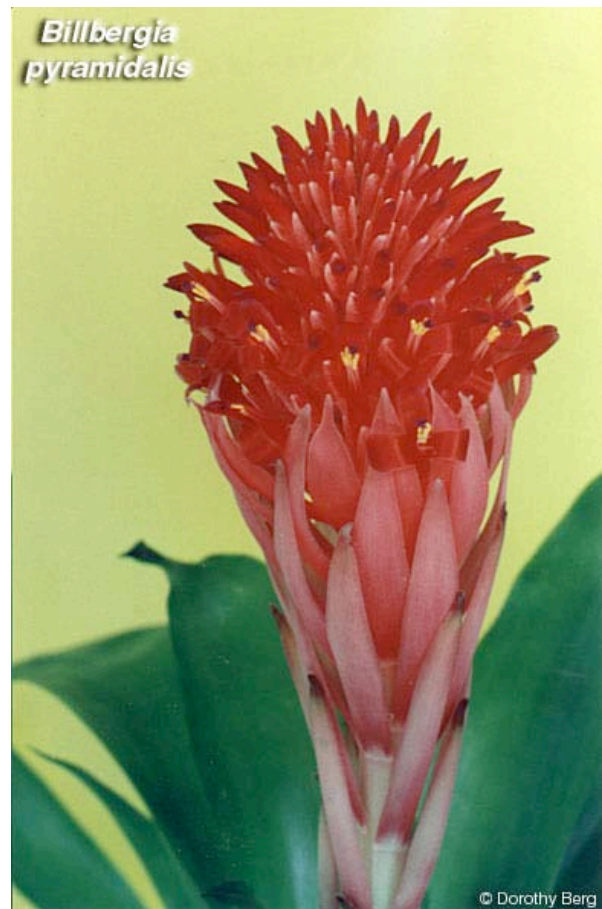
a hybrid. That cold fact, to me, fails to validate that bit of frivolous folklore that suggests how easy it is to propagate the Billbergia. Billbergia also frequently fails to bloom. When a Neoregelia fails in this fashion, it becomes famous.

I heartily recommend hanging pots to permit the use of otherwise unused space above the rest of your plants and allow maximum exposure to free air and light. Almost any pots can be adapted to hang with a modicum of ingenuity and will add much to the appearance of your growing area. The spectacle of sunlight through Billbergias is an added pleasure not available when your Billbergias live under a bench.

Today's grower, when beginning a billbergia collection is presented with a dizzying array of desirable Billbergias from which to choose. In the past, only old standard garden varieties were available. The packed pots of *Billbergia nutans*, *Billbergia pyramidalis*, and a token helicoid or two usually defined the billbergia for the average grower. The modern collection could begin with Richter's *B. Fascinator*, Carrone's *B. Pink Champagne*, Thom's and Schwarz's *B. Strawberry*, *B. Manda's Othello* and *B. Poquito Blanco*. The spectacular blooms of *Billbergia pyramidalis* are best displayed in the marginated cultivar *B. Kyoto*. For foliar color in species Billbergia, try *B. amoena* var. *viridis* or *B. amoena* var. *rubra*. Interesting form with attractive spines is available with *B. horrida* and *B. sanderiana*. Try them. You'll like them.



This is *Billbergia sanderiana*. Photo is by Shirley Grills-Konefal and is courtesy of the Florida Council of Bromeliad Societies.



This is *Billbergia pyramidalis*. This plant is common in Florida, but we do not see many of these here. Photo is by Dorothy Berg and is courtesy of the Florida Council of Bromeliad Societies.



This is *Billbergia* Kyoto. Photo is by Michael Andreas and is courtesy of the Florida Council of Bromeliad Societies.



This is *Billbergia* Strawberry that was hybridized in Northern California. Photo is by Michael Schmale & Lynne Fieber and is courtesy of the Florida Council of Bromeliad Societies.



Billbergia 'Poquito Blanco' Shown by Paul Wingert
16th World Bromeliad Conference, Chicago, Illinois, August 11 - 15, 2004

This is *Billbergia* Poquito Blanco. Photo is by Michael Andreas and is courtesy of the Florida Council of Bromeliad Societies.



This is *Billbergia horrida* var. *tigrina*. Photo is by Derek Butcher and is courtesy of the Florida Council of Bromeliad Societies.

BROMELIAD SOCIETY OF SAN FRANCISCO (BSSF)

The BSSF is a non-profit educational organization promoting the study and cultivation of bromeliads. The BSSF meets monthly on the 3rd Thursday at 7:30 PM in the Recreation room of the San Francisco County Fair Building, 9th Avenue at Lincoln Way, Golden Gate Park, San Francisco. Meetings feature educational lectures and displays of plants. Go to the affiliate section of the BSI webpage for information about our meetings.

The BSSF publishes a monthly newsletter that comes with the membership. Annual dues are single (\$15), dual (\$20). To join the BSSF, mail your name(s), address, telephone number, e-mail address, and check made payable to the BSSF to:

Harold Charns, BSSF Treasurer, 255 States Street, San Francisco, CA 94114-1405.

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