

# BROMELIAD SOCIETY OF SAN FRANCISCO

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March 2006

## NEWSLETTER

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Our next meeting will be held on **Thursday, March 16, 2006** at 7:30 PM  
Recreation Room, San Francisco County Fair Building, 9th Avenue at Lincoln Way, Golden Gate Park,  
San Francisco

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### March Program

#### Bromeliads in Hawaii

This month, **Dennis Heckart** will be visiting the mainland and will be our speaker. As many of you know, Dennis has been a long time very active member, but he has retired to the big island of Hawaii. His topic will be the Bromeliads in Hawaii. Now we know there are no native bromeliads found in Hawaii, but this state is probably the best place in the nation to grow most bromeliads (the dry-growing bromeliads do not do as well). Dennis is also a hybridizer, so he is probably having success in creating many new hybrids in Paradise.

Dennis mailed some plants to us to provide a plant table for us, so be sure to come to pick up that unique Hawaiian Bromeliad.

#### March Refreshments

**Alicia Morrison** and **Richard Wigen** signed up for refreshments this month.



© Michael Andreas  
*Billbergia 'Ole'*  
16th World Bromeliad Conference, Chicago, Illinois, August 11 - 15, 2004  
Shown by Roger Lane

This is *Billbergia* Olé, one of Don Beadle's favorite hybrids. This plant which belongs to your editor was entered in the last World Bromeliad Conference. Photo is by Michael Andreas and is courtesy of the Florida Council of Bromeliad Societies.

## February Meeting

**Peter Wan** was our speaker last month and showed us all how beautiful the Iguazu Falls are and what a diverse set of flora and fauna are found there. Among the bromeliads we saw in his show were *Vriesea procera* var. *procera*, *Aechmea disticantha*, *A. bromelifolia*, *Acanthostachys strobilacea*, *Bromelia balansae*, *Billbergia kuhlmanii*, and a *Dyckia* (possibly *Dyckia sulphera*).

We had a great turnout at the meeting – especially since it was the opening night of the San Francisco Orchid Show and many of our members are active in the orchid society or are interested in orchids. We also garnered some new members whose names are elsewhere in the newsletter.

## What You Should Know About Billbergias

This article by Don Beadle, is taken from the February 1998 [The Bromeliadvisory](#), newsletter of the Bromeliad Society of South Florida. As some of you know, Don was responsible for popularizing the *Billbergia* genus and is noted for creating fantastic hybrids

**I**t may well be that the *Billbergia* was appreciated by the natives of ancient South American civilizations before recorded history. But they did not leave evidence of their appreciation the way the early nineteenth 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. Hand-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 *Billbergia* 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 *Billbergia* is usually epiphytic in clumps, preferring airy 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 disillusion, 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 inch tall, stoloniferous rosettes and 1-plus meter clumps of *Billbergia rosea* or *B. stenopetala*. The thin, tubular shape of the helicoids *Billbergia* allows enjoyment of the color, form, and 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 concoction, no specific recommendation is made here. I use the commercial PROMIX because of its convenience and availability. *Billbergias* do not universally develop large, strong root systems and the PROMIX packs well enough to support the tall plants when they become top heavy when watered. 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* seem to be more a matter of esthetics than anything else, particularly in judged bromeliad 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 conformation 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 plants 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 schedule 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 to too little rather than too much. The imposition of a degree of stress into the everyday life of the Bill seems to produce a hardier, more compact, colorful, well-formed plant. This desirable condition is more easily attained when the *Billbergia* is kept on a strict diet.

No single factor contributes more to the unattractiveness of a Bill than does *overfeeding*. Balance, in *Billbergias* as in all things, is the key word. If you grown 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 there from. 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 ¼ 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 it 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° F. *Billbergia sanderiana* and most of its hybrids surprised me by ignoring 19°F for 30 hours. The large helicoids begin to expire or to be seriously damaged in the low 40s. They are surprisingly tender. The best temperature range for color and conformation seems to be cool to 50°F at night and balmy 70-75°F 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 fall, and that's all. We are all dealt conditions that are probably noy 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 well 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 this cannot happen by ignoring the particular needs of the plant. I note that the people who grow show quality neoregelias and Vrieseas invariably grow

show-quality Billbergias. The reciprocal is also true. The key must be caring.

Billbergias are a little more obliging 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% of the times I've attempted 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. The 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 pot 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 the leaves is an added pleasure not available when your Billbergia lives 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*, *B. pyramidalis*, and a token helicoid or two usually defined the Billbergia for the average grower. A modern collection could begin with Richter's *B. Fascinator*, Carrone's *B. Pink Champagne*, Thom's & Schwarz's *B. Strawberry*, *B. Manda's Othello*, Beadle's *B. Caramba* and *B. Hallelujah*.

The spectacular bloom of *Billbergia pyramidalis* is 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.

### Leaf Quilling in Bromeliads

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This article by Herb Plever is from Bromeliana, newsletter of the New York Bromeliad Society.

This past fall I noticed that some of my bromeliads had put up offsets whose leaves were fused together along a deep crease or creases running vertically down each leaf. This condition, referred to as "quilling", prevented the leaves from arching out and opening from the center in the typical whorl pattern.

I have also observed this condition in the past on mature bromeliads, and I decided to look into the problem. The following notes represent a consensus based on my own experiences, from a few skimpy paragraphs found in old Bromeliad Bulletins and from correspondence with Tom Mentelos and Ervin Wurthmann in Florida.

Quilling appears to be caused by insufficient water in the cup and/or nutritional deficiency at a time when the plant attempts to put forth a spurt of growth. The creasing forms in a convex bulge on the top side of the leaf which nestles and sticks into a concave rut on the underside of the next, inner leaf emerging. Often the crease joint is further cemented by sticky glue rendering it difficult to pry the two leaves apart without tearing.

Quilling seems to be found in *Vrieseas* more than other genera, especially *Vriesea* *Mariae*. Other plants on which it has been observed are *Nidularium innocentii* var. *lineatum*, *Aechmea* *Burgundy*, *A. orlandiana*, *Neoregelia* *Fairy Paint*, and *Guzmania lindenii*.

It is thought that when a very small pup emerges deformed from quilling, this is due to nutritional deficit. However, lack of water in the cup may be just another facet of the same causal relationship. In the case of two such pups I observed this past fall, I am reasonably certain that excessively dryness was the prime cause. During my extended summer vacation, my plants were usually watered not more often than every 12 days. When I resumed my regular once a week watering the

new pups which followed grew normally and without quilling.

To open the leaves of a quilled plant, invert it in a bowl of water overnight, or at least several hours. This will soften the sticky cement and permit you to spread the leaves by inserting your small finger in the cup and exerting gentle pressure outward.

The reader's experiences, observations and comments are solicited to enlarge our understanding of this perplexing condition.



***Vriesea procera***

photo by Reginaldo Baião

Here is *Vriesea procera*, one of the plants that **Peter Wan** saw on his trip to Iguazu Falls. Photo is by Reginaldo Baião and is courtesy of the Florida Council of Bromeliad Societies.

**June 6 through June 11:** Bromeliads on the Border, 17<sup>th</sup> World Bromeliad Conference in San Diego.

**June 15: Guillermo Rivera** from Cordoba, Argentina will provide a show on the bromeliads of Argentina.

**June 17 and 18:** Our annual plant sale at the San Francisco County Fair Building.

**Sunday, July 23rd:** A tour of some members' gardens and collections in San Francisco.

**August 17th: Betty Patterson** of Dallas and avid Ecuador trekker.

**September 21st: Bruce Holst** of Marie Selby Gardens and former BSI Journal co-editor on the Tapuis of Venezuela. The Lost World!!

**October 19: Tom Vincze** will show slides of his upcoming trip to either Belize or Ecuador.

**November 16: Ron Parsons:** My favorite bromeliads, a photographic appreciation.

**December 21st:** Holiday Potluck

## Welcome, New Members

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## Upcoming Meetings and Activities

Bruce McCoy has been busy lining up a wonderful set of speakers for this year's monthly meetings. Here is the list of speakers for the rest of the year:

**April 20th: Jeffrey Kent** of Kent's Bromeliad Nursery will dazzle us with a show on Ecuador and provide a plant table from his nursery.

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**BROMELIAD SOCIETY OF SAN FRANCISCO (BSSF)**

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The BSSF is a non-profit educational organization promoting the study and cultivation of bromeliads. The BSSF meets monthly on the 3<sup>rd</sup> 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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**BROMELIAD SOCIETY INTERNATIONAL**

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BROMELIAD SOCIETY  
OF  
SAN FRANCISCO

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<b>Dues for our society are now payable!</b>
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