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ADVICE TO GROW BY » SONOMA COUNTY MASTER GARDENERS
Low-maintenance air plants survive, thrive without soil



Commonly referred to as “air plants,” the technical name for these unusual plants is Tillandsia. (ISBEL DIAS / Shutterstock)

Question: My son lives in a college dorm, so he has limited space and time for houseplants. I would like to get him an unusual plant that’s relatively low-maintenance. I’ve seen air plants at the local hardware store. Do you have any information on them?

Answer: These plants are growing in popularity, and there are many resources and suppliers available. A few key points on their care requirements will help your son grow them successfully.

Commonly referred to as “air plants,” the technical name for these unusual plants is Tillandsia. They belong to the genus Tillandsia and are part of the bromeliad family, of which the pineapple is the most well-known. These plants are native to warm, temperate regions such as Central and South America and the Southern United States. They can be found in many habitats, from arid regions to those with high annual rainfall. This makes them well-suited for the home environment, where conditions can be replicated depending on your location and which species you choose.

A unique feature of these plants is how they obtain moisture and nutrients. Most plants send roots down into the soil to anchor themselves and to obtain water and other necessities for growth. Tillandsias, by contrast, have small organs on the surface of

their leaves called trichomes that give them the ability to absorb moisture through the leaves.

While the plants may develop roots, these are primarily used to help anchor them to trees, rocks or other objects. In fact, by observing these trichomes, you may be able to determine your plant's water needs.

Xeric tillandsias, those that prefer dry environments, are typically found in hot, dry climates. They tend to have a white or gray fuzzy appearance. Their light color helps them reflect light in harsh climates, while their fuzzy trichomes help them collect moisture and nutrients from dust settling from the air.

These types are a good choice for busy people who prefer a low-maintenance species with minimal water requirements. Some species, such as *Tillandsia harrisii*, can grow quite large, up to several inches in diameter.

Mesic tillandsias, on the other hand, have a higher moisture requirement than xeric species. These can typically be found in tropical forests, which have more humidity and rain. Their leaves don't have the pronounced trichomes of the xeric species. Rather, the leaves may appear smooth and glossy with a deep green hue. Although these types require more frequent watering, they can handle conditions with a bit more humidity, such as in a terrarium. *Tillandsia capitata* is a good example of a mesic variety suitable for beginners.

While it is true that tillandsias are hardy and adaptable, they do require some maintenance and care. Since these plants do not thrive in soil, watering them is a different process than with other houseplants. Give xeric species a thorough misting every few days or once a week. Since these species typically derive moisture from morning dew, misting is a good way to copy nature and provide them with the correct amount of water.

If misting is not an option due to the plant's location, then fully submerge the plant in a container of water each week for about an hour. Turn the plant upside-down so excess water can drain off. Once the plant is dry, it can be put back in its regular location. Mesic species may require more frequent misting or longer soaks.

Monitor any plants for signs of underwatering or overwatering. Dry, curled leaves or leaf-tip browning might indicate more watering is needed. However, too much water can encourage rot. Do not use regular houseplant fertilizer. If you want to encourage growth, buy fertilizer formulated specially for bromeliads.

Contributors to this week's column were Robert Williams and Patricia Rosales. The UC Master Gardener Program of Sonoma County, sonomamg.ucanr.edu, provides environmentally sustainable, science-based horticultural information to Sonoma County home gardeners. Send your gardening questions to scmgpd@gmail.com. You will receive answers to your questions either in this newspaper or from our Information Desk. You can contact the Information Desk directly at 707-565-2608 or mgsonoma@ucanr.edu.