

THE BROMELIACEAE

A World All of Their Own

By Thomas H. G. Aitken

Bromeliads, known in Trinidad as Wild Pines, belong to the pineapple family — Bromeliaceae. They are characteristic of the American tropics and subtropics. One species has been found outside this area, in West Africa. It is the largest family of seed plants almost wholly indigenous to the New World. The family comprises about 2,000 species.

The family is of economic importance for the edible pineapple (*Ananas comosus*). Spanish moss or oldman's beard (*Tillandsia usneoides*) is harvested for its "vegetable hair" for upholstery purposes. A number of the spiny-leaved terrestrial species are a source of strong fibers for making ropes.

Trinidad is the home of about 54 native species divided among eleven genera as follows:

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| 1. <i>Pitcairnia</i> (1 species) | 7. <i>Bromelia</i> (3 species) |
| 2. <i>Glomeropitcairnia</i> (1 sp.) | 8. <i>Araecoccus</i> (1 species) |
| 3. <i>Tillandsia</i> (15 species) | 9. <i>Hohenbergia</i> (1 species) |
| 4. <i>Vriesea</i> (15 species) | 10. <i>Gravisia</i> (1 species) |
| 5. <i>Guzmania</i> (4 species) | 11. <i>Aechmea</i> (9 species) |
| 6. <i>Catopsis</i> (3 species) | |

Some bromeliads grow in the ground (e.g. pineapple), some on rocks, but the large majority are attached to trees and are known as epiphytes. Many hold water in their leaf bases from which the plant absorbs nutritious substances.

Many interesting creatures and small plants are to be found in the dense growth of leaves, the water and the humus which accumulates in the thick clusters of some of the larger plants. Here are to be found ferns and creepers, snakes, lizards, spiders, scorpions, insects of all sorts. In the water are to be found aquatic plants, frogs, dragon flies, water beetles, and mosquito wigglers. In former years, much malaria in the cocoa districts of Trinidad was associated with *Anopheles bellator* and *A. homunculus* breeding in *Gravisia aquilega*.

Many bromeliads are prized horticulturally for their beautiful and bizarre-looking flowers. In Europe, the United States and elsewhere, bromeliads are grown commercially for use as household ornamental plants.

Prepared for an exhibit sponsored by the Trinidad Field Naturalists' Club commemorating their 70th Anniversary 10-16 July 1961 — at the Royal Victoria Institute, Frederick Street, Port-of-Spain. The exhibit consisted of various species of named bromeliads as well as bowls of associated live mosquito larvae and pupae.

Trinidad Regional Virus Laboratory, Federation Park, Port-of-Spain.

