

## A Bromeliad for the Birds

Written by Jeff Shimonski, BT Contributor  
March 2019

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### Set out *Pitcairnia* for hungry hummingbirds



ell, it has certainly been another warm winter. I've had almost no noticeable cold damage in my garden. Considering the plant protection efforts we used to enact every fall and winter at Parrot Jungle, I'd say we're benefiting horticulturally these days, since plant growth, at least for the more tropical species, isn't slowed or stopped by the cold weather.

By this time of year, many trees would have usually dropped their leaves. Many of the *Ficus* species would have dropped

*all* their foliage after a few days of 40-degree weather. But now the foliage drops seem to coincide more with drought, as they do in the plants' native habitats. There's foliage loss in dry season, then flowers, followed by new foliage when the rain begins.

Many plants here are now growing through the winter. My bromeliads, for example, are starting to bloom months earlier. The accompanying photo shows a really cool inflorescence, the structure that holds the individual flowers, growing on the ground at the base of a *Pitcairnia corallina*.

The *Pitcairnia* genus of bromeliads is a large primitive group that doesn't look like your typical bromeliad. There are no "cups" to hold water. It normally has large leaves and can look kind of

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“grassy.” This *Pitcairnia* is no exception. It grows long upright leaves that can reach four to five feet in height. There are no spines on the leaves, but many species, including this one, have sharp little spines on the leaf petioles (the thin structure that holds the leaf and attaches it to the plant). A clump of these can make a nice pedestrian barrier! This is a tough plant.

It is interesting to note that this particular *Pitcairnia* species has its brightly colored inflorescence growing on the ground. I have seen these growing two to three feet long. Now, how do the individual flowers get pollinated? And why are they so brightly colored? After all, they are growing on the ground.

Well, if you look closely at the individual flowers, you can see they are long and curved like the beak of a hummingbird. The pollen and the pistol, the male and female parts of the flower, sit at the top, and when a hummingbird sticks its beak into the flower for nectar, it gets pollen dusted on its forehead. When the hummingbird goes to the next flower and does the same thing, the pollen adheres to the pistol, the female part of the flower. Yes, these are hummingbird-pollinated flowers.

The individual flowers begin to open in sequence, starting with those closest to the plant. Usually a couple of flowers are open at a time, and they only last a day. On healthy plants the inflorescence can get quite long, so there will be flowers for a couple of weeks. Hummingbirds that trapline learn where the flowers are and put them in their daily travels. Of course, this is in their native habitats in Ecuador and Peru, where these hummingbird species live. I doubt that the native ruby-throated hummingbird that passes through our area in the winter will go to these ground-hugging flowers, but you never know.

In my garden, I grow this *Pitcairnia* in a large clay container. It took a few years, but now when the inflorescences emerge, they hang down the sides of the pot, making them easier to see.

Like almost all bromeliad species, the individual plant that blooms dies afterward. I let these continue to grow for a while, until the leaves turn too brown. Remember that as long as there's green in the leaves, food is still being made for the plant. This species, like many bromeliads species, is stoloniferous. Stolons are little stalks with vascular systems that connect the plants together, provide structural support, and share nutrients and water.

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Remember, too, when you are handling this plant or cutting out the dead ones, to wear gloves. The little spines near the ground are quite prominent.

Many *Pitcairnia* species deal well with drought. They make excellent xerophytes for the garden and will drop their leaves until water or rain is available. I never have to fertilize them. Just give them an organic rich soil, but with good drainage.

I've utilized *Pitcairnia* species for landscape areas where it's tough to grow plants because of the full sun and heat, seasonal lack of water, or the damage caused by marauding pedestrians and dogs walking through planted beds.

These plants should be considered for more landscapes and gardens. Some species have striking blooms, some not so striking -- but those with erect inflorescences offer our hummingbird visitors nectar. Try something new.

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