

Your best media mix may be in your yard



Years ago, when growing bromeliads in containers was gaining popularity, there was almost a religious fervor about having the precise soil or media mix. One had to have equal parts peat moss, perlite, and tree fern. If you didn't use these ingredients, then you weren't a proper grower.

Soil mixes for different species of orchids and other plants were also exotic and pricey. I couldn't afford these specialized mixes, so I always made up my own.

For many years at the Parrot Jungle, we ran a composting operation and used the finished product as a soil mix for the container plants in our nursery and in the landscape when we needed more soil. This worked out well for the plants and saved the park lots of money since we weren't buying truckloads of commercial soil mixes.

Remember, nursery plants are grown for production purposes, with a soil mix or special media mix designed to produce the best product in the shortest time and most cost-effective way. Often these soil mixes begin to decompose after a few years and will create anaerobic

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conditions for the roots. This isn't good for the long-term containerized plant.

We solved that problem for our nursery plants by adding sand (that we'd removed from our petting zoo) into the compost. This made the soil mix very heavy and well drained. We grew plants sometimes for years in the same containers that we would rotate in and out of our gardens when they were in bloom. It was a perfect situation, cost-effective and long lasting.

The photo that accompanies this article is one of my favorite little bromeliads, *Neoregelia lilliputiana*, a diminutive species that grows as an epiphyte on trees. I grow many of my containerized bromeliads and orchids in a mix of decomposing palm trunk or crushed old and decomposing coconuts. These epiphytic plants thrive in this media mix. The bromeliads and orchids that naturally grow as terrestrial plants in the ground grow best in my finished compost.

I accumulate old coconuts from my garden and allow them to begin to break down. They don't take much space. When they're brittle enough to crush or break with a good stomp of my work shoe, I break up the pieces further by hand and stuff them into pots. The pots are probably filled about 50-60 percent with fiber, and the rest is space. This media allows for excellent drainage and aeration since it's porous, and there are no waterlogging or disease issues.

By the time the coconut is completely broken down, the bromeliad or orchid is usually growing outside the pot and too large for it. Sometimes when the roots of the plant are still attached to the pot, I carefully break the pot into several pieces without breaking the roots and replant the entire old pot and root mass into a larger pot with new coconut fiber media. This works best with clay or ceramic containers, but I've broken up plastic pots, too.

I've had to cut down palms in my garden for various reasons, from lightning strikes that killed some of the taller coconut palms to the trees growing too close to powerlines. I'd stack the trunk sections in a small pile, and after a couple of years the mass inside the trunks would become soft and pliable enough to break up by hand. This also makes an excellent soil medium for bromeliads and orchids.

When we used to rotate large beds of bromeliads at the park, we'd always save the mulch from chipping the palm fronds and trunks to plant the bromeliads into raised beds. We discovered

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this by accident. We always used the cleanest-looking tree chipping mulch in the park just because it looked better, and we saved the stringy fibrous palm mulch for the nursery area, where it wasn't so important to look "clean" and tidy.

It quickly became obvious, though, that the bromeliads grew better in the palm fiber mulch. It didn't break down so fast, which meant the bromeliad roots wouldn't get waterlogged when there was lots of rain. When the bromeliads finished blooming, we'd take the best plants back to the nursery, and mix the remaining decomposing mulch and old bromeliads back into our compost pile to be reused as soil for our nursery or garden.

So what does all this mean? It means that when growing plants -- and, in this case, epiphytes like bromeliads and orchids that normally grow on the trunks and branches of trees and palms in nature -- try to emulate natural conditions. Bromeliad roots need good aeration. Actually, all plant roots need good aeration.

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